

## Aboriginality and Black Australian Drama

### Abstract for chapter 9

In this chapter, distinctive elements of Aboriginal drama are explored. These are briefly contrasted with the work of selected White Australian playwrights in order to highlight the contribution of Black Australian dramatists to the Aboriginal movement, to the formulation of the concept of Aboriginality, and to the enrichment of Australian literature as a whole.

Important aspects of Aboriginality – endurance, pride, protest, poetry, sorrow, anger and humour – are discussed, but the distinctive Black Australian approach to humour is given particular attention.

#### *Keywords*

Aboriginality, drama, education, Eva Johnson, humour, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Robert Merritt, theatre

## *Aboriginality and Black Australian Drama*

In 1971, a new quarterly magazine began in Australia. *Identity* was destined to become the single most important and influential Aboriginal periodical in the country. The magazine's name was very appropriate for, especially during the six-and-a-half years that Jack Davis was its editor, the magazine explored the evolving Aboriginal view of what it meant to be a 'First Australian' living in the 1970s and 1980s. This theme of Aboriginality is probably the most important of all those dealt with in contemporary Black Australian writing. It underlies the Aboriginal preoccupation with history, and is closely related to issues of black politics, health, education and cultural achievement.

There is no single definition of Aboriginality. One approach is to explore the range of experience encompassed by the term, as Kevin Gilbert does in *Living Black*:

But what is Aboriginality? Is it being tribal? Who is an Aboriginal? Is he or she someone who feels that other Aboriginals are somehow dirty, lazy, drunken, bludging? Is an Aboriginal anyone who has some degree of Aboriginal blood in his or her veins and who has demonstrably been disadvantaged by that? Or is an Aboriginal someone who has had the reserve experience? Is Aboriginality institutionalised gutlessness, an acceptance of the label 'the most powerless people on earth'? Or is Aboriginality, when all the definitions have been exhausted, a yearning for a different way of being, a wholeness that was presumed to have existed [before 1788]?<sup>1</sup>

These questions underline many of the negative characteristics which may form part of the Black Australian self-definition. However, as many of the women and men whom Gilbert interviewed revealed, Aboriginality was for them as much a positive state of mind as any

catalogue of observable attributes. In the words of Keith Smith:

I don't mean that we have to go back with our spears and our boomerangs and nulla nullas and hunt our tucker and do this type of thing. What I mean is that we've got to regain the spirit of our Aboriginality so that we can go on to greater things according to whatever a community wants . . . The spirit, the soul, the Aboriginality of it. You're an Aboriginal, you've got to be proud, you've got to know something of your background, know where you come from, where you're going and what you're doing, but at the same time you've got to take that Aboriginality with you. You're a black, you know and you've got to respect the black. Nobody can change it.<sup>2</sup>

Aboriginality is the legacy of traditional Black Australian culture. It implies movement towards the future while safeguarding the pride and dignity of the past. But Aboriginality is also counter-cultural in European terms: a reaction against the dictates of White Australian society. This can lead to a black self-image which is potentially very rebellious and outside the law. In interview, Robert Merritt explained this alternative form of the search for identity:

It suits society's purpose to give government mandates to build filthy institutions that keep Aborigines in prison. If you want an identity today . . . if you're sick you'll get a band-aid, and you're an Aborigine – and everyone knows about ya. And if you're a drunk, or if you're a crook, you'll get a two-bob lawyer that's been out of law school for five years. You've got an identity. If you want to be a normal person there's no incentive in life whatsoever for ya . . . To break the law now – it's a substitute initiation.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Aboriginality is both an inheritance from Black Australian history and an immediate, sometimes violent reaction to the Black Australian present.

More than ever before, Aborigines from all parts of the country are mounting a unified response to major events. The 1982 Brisbane Commonwealth Games protests and the anti-Bicentennial protests of 1988 in Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra are the most obvious examples of this trend. The national scale of these causes and effects shows that, despite past divisions and disagreements, pan-Aboriginalism is an increasingly important part of the Black Australian self-definition. One of the most prominent Aboriginal national representatives, Charles Perkins (Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs), describes the emergent feeling as a 'growing appreciation' of Black Australians for one another:

Aborigines are starting to realise right throughout Australia that there's a thing that's binding them together: that's the psychology of being an Aboriginal, that's culture, that's blood-line, everything.<sup>4</sup>

It is ironic that greater Aboriginal self-confidence and the oppression that still persists in some areas of Australian society have both helped to articulate the idea of Aboriginality. The concept of Aboriginality encompasses many things: respect for the Aboriginal past and for traditional Black Australian ties to the land, a sense of pride and dignity, and sometimes one of dismay and outrage. An impetus towards action in both the social and political spheres is also involved, ranging from petitions and demonstrations to the establishment of Aboriginal-controlled health, legal, and housing services. The pan-Aboriginal trend is reinforcing all of these factors and is enabling spokespeople of the Black Australian movement – be they politicians, artists, social workers or writers – to gain a voice and a supportive public.

When Aboriginal people define themselves in literature, they emphasise not just the shared experience of oppression but also the shared enjoyment of life. In spite of all that has been endured by Aborigines, they have managed to retain a distinctive sense of humour which acts to combat depression and to promote the cohesion of the Black Australian group. The mimicry and mockery of whites and the humorous celebration of their own lifestyle has been one way in which blacks have opposed the encroachments of European society, and have asserted their own independence and capacity for endurance. Jack Davis has succinctly stated that, historically, Aborigines 'learnt to keep themselves alive by laughing'.<sup>5</sup> Those who have carried out extensive field work in Aboriginal communities corroborate this statement. The White Australian anthropologist Anna Haebich has commented:

Aboriginal people keep on laughing to stay afloat. In interviews they emphasise the good times and it's very hard indeed to get them to talk about the bad times.<sup>6</sup>

This reliance upon laughter in the midst of adversity is an important element in the Aboriginal self-image. It is one which emerges very clearly in Aboriginal literature, particularly in Black Australian drama.

The historical dimension of black drama was examined in Chapter Six of this study. In this chapter, other equally distinctive elements of Aboriginal drama will be explored. These will be briefly contrasted with the work of selected White Australian playwrights, in order to highlight the contribution of Black Australian dramatists to the Aboriginal movement, to the formulation of the concept of Aboriginality, and to the enrichment of Australian literature as a whole.

Aboriginality has many facets: endurance, pride, protest, poverty, sorrow, anger and humour. All of these important aspects will be discussed, but the distinctive Black Australian approach to humour will be given particular attention.

Black Australian playwrights have all used humour extensively in their works, though none of their plays could properly be termed a comedy. All the Aboriginal plays written so far describe scenes of hardship, misery, poverty, discrimination and even death, but none of them is unrelievedly sombre in tone. Humour tempers the seriousness of these plays and concurrently enhances their impact; it rescues them from any danger of being oppressive in tone. As Jack Davis has observed, black drama usually displays a wide range of emotions:

Don't just show them [the audience] the comic side of life right through . . . show them sadness, pathos, gladness, happiness, sorrow, and all the in-between . . . all those emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Since the elements of Black Australian humour are so relevant to the concept of Aboriginality, it is worthwhile to examine the general characteristics of that humour before observing its specific applications in Black Australian plays. In an excellent article on the subject, Stanner noted both the general and particular aspects of the phenomenon. There are, of course, situations and events which both White and Black Australians find amusing:

the hammer on the thumb, the slip on banana peel, the sudden loss of dignity – all these 'reversals', the basis of a universal class of humour, evoke much the same responses among the Aborigines as among Europeans.<sup>8</sup>

However, as Stanner notes, there is a further class of humour which seems particular to Aboriginal people. Although it is difficult to define in a precise way, Black Australians have indicated some of its characteristics:

The humour of western culture, because western culture is competitive, is itself competitive . . . You'll find that amongst traditional Aboriginal people . . . 'put down' humour is not seen as all that funny. [They 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 recognise somebody way down the street by the way they walk. Because they know people's walks and mannerisms. And those things are more noticed by, and more remembered by, Aborigines than they are by white people.<sup>9</sup>

The humour seen in many Black Australian plays derives from the traditions and particular skills of Aborigines, especially those of mime and impersonation. Jack Davis has given a vivid example of these talents in the fringe-dwelling situation, and has shown how they can inspire Black Australian drama:

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 . . . Like the man who burns his feet and he doesn't even know his feet are alight. He's standing on the fire and he says [imitating voice] 'By Crikey, I can smell somethin' burnin' there! You fellas burn an old bag there somewhere? Or you burnin' kangaroo skin?' [New voice] 'Uncle! You're standing in the fire. Get out of the fire there!' He never wore boots for forty years and he's got callouses on his feet that thick, and he was standing in the fire. His feet were burning and he didn't even know it! And laughed – you know that, [claps] . . . that went around the camp for a week. Well, little incidents like that, you know, that carry on all the time – it's not very hard to put 'em down on paper. I'm sure the Aboriginal playwrights have seen that.<sup>10</sup>

In interview, Robert Merritt highlighted the same point when asked about the levity in his play *The Cake Man*: 'Well, there's humour in the people . . . no one's looked at it before . . . it's beautiful'.<sup>11</sup>

While the distinctive Aboriginal approach to humour is visible in contemporary black theatre, its roots are in the tribal/traditional sphere. Stanner noted this phenomenon amongst the traditional and semi-traditional Aborigines with whom he lived and worked for many years. He relates the reaction of an old man, one of the last remaining members of his tribe, to his question, 'In a few years you will all be dead; there will be no blackfellows left; but you laugh about it. Why do you laugh? I see nothing amusing':

He would not be drawn for some time. Finally he said, 'Bye-and-bye, altogether blackfellow dead. Plenty white man sit-down this country. White man walkabout longa bush. Him losim himself longa bush. Altogether white man try findim. Altogether white man losim himself longa bush. No blackfeller. Can't findim. Whitefeller dead. Blackfeller dead.' And he smiled sardonically.<sup>12</sup>

Stanner also emphasises the longevity of humorous tales derived from real-life experiences amongst Black Australians. In one noteworthy case, he and an Aboriginal friend, Charlie Dargie, shot a barramundi wallowing in a pond – which someone else had already caught:

We had touched the depths. To shoot a caught fish tied up to the bank by a string. Jarawak saw that the tale spread. The blacks never forgot it. To this day, half a

lifetime later, they still laugh. When I go fishing with them, someone is sure to say in an innocent tone, 'You got plenty bullet?'<sup>13</sup>

The kind of humour which Stanner describes still persists and is given effective expression in Black Australian drama.

Until now, Aboriginal dramatists have taken their inspiration almost entirely from the direct observation and recollection of personal experiences. To a great extent, characters are based upon individuals the playwright has known, or are at the least dramatic impressions of men and women coping with situations which are typically (if not always exclusively) Aboriginal. To the extent that Black Australian dramatists are writing for their own people, the degree of faithfulness to their perceived reality is the criterion by which many blacks judge the works. In fact, sometimes the arbitrary division between stage and personal experience breaks down entirely. Gerry Bostock has related how, during the performance of one scene of his play *Here Comes the Nigger* – in which a group of Aborigines are set upon by two white thugs – some Black Australians from Elcho Island became incensed and tried to climb on to the stage to offer their assistance, yelling 'I'll help ya, brother!' and 'I'll come and save ya, cousin!'<sup>14</sup> This is relevant to the concept of Aboriginality. Not only was the reaction of the visiting blacks – while understandable – very amusing, but Bostock takes obvious pleasure in relating the story as proof of the power and immediacy of his drama. In other words, the same episode in Bostock's play produced a violent reaction and a humorous response; both arose out of the *verisimilitude* of the drama.

The Aboriginal playwrights' goal of faithfulness to perceived black reality is clearly an important one. Black Australian dramatists have endeavoured to illustrate the Aboriginal past and present, however sorrowful it may be, with honesty and directness. For example, Kevin Gilbert explores the psychology of deprivation, subservience and loss in his first play, *The Cherry Pickers*. Gilbert's play was performed at the Mews Theatre in Sydney in August 1971, during the Captain Cook Bicentenary celebrations, an ironic time for the debut of the first Aboriginal play. No less ironic was the fact that it took nearly eighteen years for *The Cherry Pickers* to be published, in the Australian bicentennial year of 1988.<sup>15</sup>

*The Cherry Pickers* focusses upon a group of itinerant Aboriginal fruit-pickers who return each year to the same white-owned cherry orchard. The fruit season represents the climax of the year for these fringe-dwellers, not only because the 'Cherry tree means

money – and food'<sup>16</sup> but also because of the convivial atmosphere which is created in their camp. As the play opens, they are waiting to begin work at the orchard and are also awaiting the arrival of Johnollo, a hero for the children and an inspiration in more ways than one for the women: 'that Johnollo! 'leven babies he made las' season an' only one miss!' (p. 12).

However, this year there is something amiss. Despite the slapstick atmosphere of the play's opening, there are almost immediate indications that all is not right in the orchard. First, the young boy Phonso runs on stage with a dead rosella in his hand yelling 'Johnollo has come!' (p. 3), which is not only a false alarm but also foreshadows the end of the play. Then Subina, the last remaining member of the 'old tribe', reports that she has witnessed a bad omen – the 'Wahwee Bhugeene' or [spirit] bat – which is believed by the group to be the 'Messenger of the Dead' (p. 6). Soon afterwards, she breaks down in tears recalling the wooing of her now dead husband: 'All dead! – all . . . gone!' (p. 7) she laments. This is followed by the arrival of their European boss, Gegga, who brings the ominous news that 'King Eagle' (the name the Aborigines have given to the oldest and largest of the cherry trees) is 'a little slower and dying a little I think' (p.13).

As the play progresses, the audience realises how much the Aboriginal characters have lost: gone is their traditional livelihood, gone is their self-determination (after all, it is a white man's orchard, however much of a 'White blackfella' [p. 6] he might be), and gone is their tribal culture. The sense of loss produces a strong feeling of pessimism at the end of *The Cherry Pickers*, when it is revealed that Johnollo has died in a car accident on his way to the orchard. The curtain closes on the group wailing a dirge while they burn King Eagle in a funeral pyre. Yet in spite of all this privation and bereavement, the fringe-dwellers have not lost their Aboriginality. This is articulated most clearly in the play through the vibrancy and humour of Gilbert's dialogue, a quality which endears the characters to the audience while it celebrates their endurance.

This jocular dialogue has definite characteristics: it customarily has sexual overtones, often deals with such themes as religion, alcohol and gambling, and frequently deflates pretensions, especially those of White Australians and of 'white-thinking' Aborigines. A clear example of this last approach occurs when an Aboriginal army private visits the camp of the black fruit-pickers and introduces himself

ostentatiously as 'Jeremiah Ivan James Chickenmar Edward Vance Goolagong from Myameelareena Station, West Weethaliban'. Another Aboriginal character, Emma, replies mockingly:

*You ain't no one* but just old Jerry Coolly an' you never *had* no King nor no Country 'cause you is a blackfeller like us – now git! (p.11)

Sexual innuendo consistently weaves its way through much of Gilbert's entertaining dialogue, especially during that part of the play which is an interlude of pure fun and mocking, termed 'geenjng time'. Punning, slang expressions, mimicry and quick repartee are the hallmarks of this lively scene, and the undertone is consistently sexual:

FANNY:               How's yer bunions?  
 REGGIE:             A bunion grows on a foot – I haven't made the grade yet!  
 FANNY:               How's yer ditty?  
 REGGIE:             Not so pretty – but it's well and able!  
 FANNY:               How's yer knackers?  
 REGGIE:             They drive me crackers beneath me sweeties table! (p. 28)

Gilbert's ear for the poetic potential of the patois in his local region is obvious. One has little doubt that the *double entendres* are taken from real life exchanges, and they are just as believable as the 'misunderstandings' of English which he includes:

OLD TODDLES:     Heh-heh-heh. Say, were you on Mrs Gegg's 'clinic' inspection this morning? – no? – well she goes 'round checkin' everyone's teeth an' that an' she come to old Biblar an' asks, 'how's yer pulse this mornin' Biblar? Old Biblar sez, 'Oh, missus they're hanging very low!' (p. 29)

This is not just punning for its own sake. The episode of 'geenjng time' is, linguistically and dramatically, one of the most energetic and successful scenes in *The Cherry Pickers*. It is also integrated into the structure of the play as a whole, so that immediately after the hilarious lampooning of policemen and motorcyclist which takes place, a real motorcycle policeman arrives on the scene bearing the news of Johnollo's death. The transition is very effective, and the mourning with which the play closes is accentuated by the frivolity which precedes it. Yet, though Gilbert demonstrates an acute ear for colloquial dialogue in some parts of the play, elsewhere he sacrifices naturalism and plausibility to make a socio-political point about Aboriginality. The language of Zeena (one of the cherry-pickers) is so elevated as to strain credibility, in a play which seems to be striving for linguistic credibility:

Oh – I’m not complaining. I am merely trying to tell you that we can’t live, nor find a new life by embracing a stone-age identity in this Nuclear Age. We should be rightfully proud of our old culture for what it was – the expression, the cry, the search for beauty by primitive man. This *truth* we should hold, and advance by, not revert to that cultural age. Man must advance, must mature, and must never, never revert back for life is a constant process of growth (p. 23).

A number of related themes run through *The Cherry Pickers*: the affinity between Aboriginal people and nature; the despoiling of the natural world by Europeans; the inability of Black Australians to return to the past, despite the retention of tradition and superstition; and the incapacity of even ‘good whites’ to fully comprehend and appreciate the Aboriginal ethos. But the most important achievement of the play is its assertion of the vitality of Aboriginality in the face of all odds and this is accomplished, above all, through the vibrancy of Gilbert’s dialogue. He is a far less successful dramatist when he pontificates. His real talent emerges in his entertaining dialogue – especially when that dialogue is humorous.

Gilbert’s second play, the unpublished *Ghosts in Cell Ten*, is further evidence of the author’s keen ear for black speech patterns. Like many of the Black Australian plays, it is set in an environment typically, if not exclusively, Aboriginal: in a prison. It is interesting that Gilbert’s stated aim in writing the play was to expose the ‘actual debasement, the punishment and psychological attacks’<sup>17</sup> which he maintains take place daily in the prisons of New South Wales. It is a subject on which Gilbert can justly claim to be an expert from his own experience: ‘The ritualised prison routine, the body searches, the mental and medical attitudes which I portray in the play are based on actual observation’ (p. 2).

*Ghosts in Cell Ten* is ostensibly about the mental and physical torments of a white character called Preacher, whom the reader observes progressively hardening throughout his prison term. At the outset he is a raw novice in the violent prison world and is treated as such by the ‘screws’; by the close of the play he is a seasoned veteran who is being accused of the murder of his cell-mate. However, the play is really about all sorts of prejudice and exploitation: personal, psychological, sexual and racial. In fact, it is not until the Aboriginal character, Clarry, is thrust into the cell with Preacher that the drama gains focus and real power – and this is three-quarters of the way through the work. Up to that point, Gilbert details more or less plausible events of daily prison life, which alternate with highly implausible dream sequences in which

Preacher sees angels of salvation and corruption tormenting his sleep: the 'ghosts' of the title.

The dialogue between Preacher and Clarry is the focal point of the play. It enables Gilbert not only to criticise the judicial and punitive system, but also to illustrate perceived failings in his own Black Australian society. Clarry reveals that he has been unjustly imprisoned for a rape which he never committed, but scorns the help of the Aboriginal Legal Service:

Too much work involved for them. They're all too busy fightin' each other or too busy seeing who can git the most out of the set-up by putting in the least work effort to worry about *me* (p. 32).

This is definitely a contentious viewpoint for an Aboriginal playwright to express. The critique is, significantly, not limited to Aboriginal issues. Gilbert casts the net wider so that he addresses larger questions of human rights and prison reform; in the words of Preacher: 'They call it 'rehabilitation and correction' mate, the system at Grafton is as corrupt as any "crim" I've ever known' (p. 33).

Clarry's harangue concerning the oppression of Aborigines is extremely strong and sustained: the socio-political criticism in *Ghosts in Cell Ten* is far more overt than in *The Cherry Pickers*. But Gilbert rescues the play from unbroken didacticism by again interspersing humour with seriousness. After Preacher rolls Clarry a 'joint' the latter exclaims:

CLARRY: Christ it's savage on the old lungs. Tastes like dried horseshit.

PREACHER: Dunno, I've never tried horseshit before.

CLARRY: You missed out on a very important stage in your childhood then. I've smoked cane, grass, tea-leaves, horseshit, everything that could be rolled, including goatshit. This tastes like horseshit (p. 36).

As in all the Aboriginal plays the humour is direct, unabashed and frequently sexual. It also rings true, as when Preacher asks Clarry if the 'grass' has taken effect:

PREACHER: Say Clarry are you feeling it yet?

CLARRY: Too bloody right I am. I've got me two hands around it to stop it wriggling up and poking me eyeballs out! (p. 37).

This is not egregious vulgarity. It serves a dramatic purpose, which is to act as a foil for Clarry's socio-political commentary and, thereby, to enhance the effectiveness of his pointed censure:

It's a good country with whites in it? The Pub crawl bragging, the Poky playing, the bet on the gee-gees, Melbourne Cup, 'Footy', and the bloody R.S.L. club mind? If you can even call it a mind. The whites in this country are only fit for Gun-fodder in times of war. *That's* why the Yanks use Australia (p. 39).

This is heady political commentary. But is it viable as theatre? Until now, no Australian company has tackled a production of *Ghosts in Cell Ten* nor has any publisher printed the script. In a number of ways this is regrettable. The play is not entirely successful, for its 'dream' sequences are not skilfully presented, and do not harmonise with the hard-edged atmosphere of the remainder of the work. Nevertheless, *Ghosts in Cell Ten* is sociological drama of an important and often entertaining kind. It serves to illustrate the bitterness and resentment which is often as much a component of Aboriginality as the attitude towards sex, violence, and humour. Many Australians were shocked by the initial plays of Buzo, Hibberd and Williamson, but now it is appreciated – both inside and outside their country – just how much they have done to produce a distinctive Australian voice in theatre. Many Australians would find *Ghosts in Cell Ten* disturbing and shocking today but again, that could potentially be a salutary experience, not only for White Australian audiences, but also for Black Australian writers trying to gain more literary autonomy.

Robert Merritt has spoken of imprisonment as a 'substitute initiation' for Aboriginal people, and it is an initiation which many Black Australians have undergone. The dilemma of the high imprisonment rate of Aborigines has received considerable publicity and the problem is recognised as being, to a significant extent, the result of bias built into the law enforcement and judicial apparatus of White Australia. For example, in a speech in Canberra in February 1983, Pat O'Shane (the permanent head of the New South Wales ministry of Aboriginal Affairs) noted that the rate of imprisonment of Black Australians in the state was approximately 600 per 100 000 people: 'many times higher than the rate of incarceration of other indigenous groups throughout the world'.<sup>18</sup> In 1971, the rate of Aboriginal imprisonment in Australia as a whole was 1000/100 000, which was over fourteen times higher than the national average for all groups of 70/100 000.<sup>19</sup> O'Shane concluded that 'there is something very seriously wrong with the Australian criminal justice system'.<sup>20</sup> The fact that so many Aboriginal authors have been in jail at some stage of their lives is one indication of how widespread this institutionalised anti-Aboriginal bias has been.

Ironically, some of the most significant Aboriginal writers, such as Gilbert and Merritt, received a better education behind bars than they ever did as free men. In short, some of the finest examples of Aboriginal literature are born of incarceration.

*The Cake Man*, written during 1973-74 when Merritt was held in Bathurst jail, is one of these. The historical relevance of *The Cake Man* was discussed in Chapter Six; the emphasis upon Black Australian history displayed in Merritt's play is a vital component of the concept of Aboriginality. But the author captures many other elements of the Black Australian self-image in *The Cake Man*. Like Gilbert in *The Cherry Pickers*, he portrays the contemporary search for Aboriginal identity, the loss of traditional authority structures, and the figurative emasculation of Aboriginal people which has resulted. *The Cake Man*, too, is set in a location which is characteristically Black Australian: a government settlement or, in New South Wales, a 'mission'. Merritt depicts this environment as it was for many New South Wales Aborigines in their childhood. Merritt's play is very popular amongst the Aboriginal people because of its verisimilitude. Song-writer Candy Williams's sentiments are typical: 'It really freaked me out. The first production was really tops. It moved me no end, because on every mission there's a Cake Man story.'<sup>21</sup>

Despite these similarities with *The Cherry Pickers*, *The Cake Man* is more subtle and complex drama. It is a play built upon often bitter illusions. While Ruby's religious devotion does give her the strength to keep her family together in the face of the despondence and near-alcoholism of her husband – the ironically named Sweet William – it also enjoins her to accept the will of God without question. In John Newfong's view:

She is only strong because she believes more devoutly in her own fantasy. So whether you call that strength or an illusion of strength, I don't know. Sweet William at least believes in his own potential. And Ruby, because of her Christian beliefs, undermines his beliefs in himself because she doesn't dare believe in herself.<sup>22</sup>

However, Sweet William also lives in a fantasy world. He manages to convince himself and, significantly, his son Pumpkinhead, that his major decisive action of going to Sydney will be the salvation of the family:

Rube, I'll just go down to that Sydney, I'm gonna be lucky and get a job and find somewhere that's gonna be ours, and soon buy a big red house like Pumpkinhead wants and clothes and a 'lectric iron for you, 'lectric light, too, and plenty of tucker for the kids that we could buy out of my good job I'll get. I can work, Rube, you know I can. Job, that's all it needs.<sup>23</sup>

This dream is an important one: not only is it expressed in Western, materialistic terms (which shows the degree of Sweet William's acculturation) but Merritt makes it obvious that the character has no chance of realising his goal. Through no fault of his own, Sweet William is arrested because he is standing near a pub door when the police arrive to quell a brawl. According to Brian Syron, who has directed and acted in a number of productions of *The Cake Man*, what is important is not the arrest of the father but the instilling of hope and pride in the son. In his view, the key is Sweet William's decision to try and break out of the institutionalised degradation of the mission system: 'The sons of the father will be perceptive even if the father is not'.<sup>24</sup>

Somewhat like Alan at the close of *Long Live Sandawara*, Pumpkinhead is to be the hope and the 'instrument of change'<sup>25</sup> for the future. Newfong would add that Sweet William's victory was not merely a vicarious one, but primarily consisted in his action to break free from what he terms the 'black matriarchy', which had contributed to his powerlessness. As he explains it:

When one society is dominated by another society and the dominating matrix of society is male-dominated, the men of the *dominated* society will be emasculated. And it's almost a subconscious thing, you see. You notice that in *The Cake Man* the mission superintendent and Inspector . . . defer to Ruby – this is to further undermine William's standing, simply by not addressing themselves to him. And this is what is always done.<sup>26</sup>

Newfong's theory is, to say the least, contentious, in that it suggests a profound psychological and political ploy to suppress Aboriginal men.<sup>27</sup> The theory is particularly intriguing in view of the female leadership of numerous Black Australian lobby groups and services, as well as some government departments. But Newfong goes too far to ascribe to these women positions of power by default. There is no doubt that Aboriginal women, from Oodgeroo Noonuccal and MumShirl to Margaret Valadian and Pat O'Shane, have been innovators and leaders because of their own talents, determination and commitment. It is difficult to maintain, as Newfong does, that politicians 'find it easier to deal with black women because "they're only women anyhow"'. They find intelligent black men much more of a threat.<sup>28</sup> While it is valid for him to note the way in which sexism can reinforce racism, his implication that the only effective Black Australian spokespeople are males is contradicted by the achievements

of numerous Aboriginal women. It is arguable that the real reasons for the frail self-image of Aboriginal men like Sweet William are that he has been prevented as a father from providing for his wife and children by unemployment, the institutional bias of Aboriginal reserve managers and the prejudice of White Australians.

*The Cake Man* raises numerous socio-political issues which bear upon Aboriginal male/female relationships, activism, and the Black Australian self-image. Merritt highlights many aspects of Aboriginality in his play: of despondency, family closeness, the threat of alcohol and the retention of pride – or at least the capacity to be proud. The potential for an unremittingly pessimistic atmosphere is skilfully offset by the author, again through the use of levity. The humour of Robert Merritt is less brash and overt than that of Kevin Gilbert, but it is derived from similar sources: it is primarily the humour of ‘sacrilege’, of the bottle and of sexual innuendo. Sweet William repeatedly takes organised religion to task:

What’s that bit again? ‘For y’tavel over land and sea to make one convert . . . an’ when ya finished with ‘im, why, that feller’s twice as fit for hell as you are y’self’ (pp. 12-13).

The double meanings contained in Merritt’s humorous dialogue have usually been enthusiastically received by Black and White Australians alike. For example, Sweet William’s lament, ‘I been stewin’ all my life. Ain’t made me no better, Rube’ is answered by his wife with a smile and the words ‘You always tasted good to me’ (p. 32) – a line which exemplifies the subtle and affectionate sense of levity in the play. Merritt also has a keen ear for the colloquial speech, not only of adults but of children as well. His gentle humour is very successful, as when Ruby admonishes Pumpkinhead for being gullible enough to believe in ‘birriks’ (or invisible spirit devils). He replies:

Me and Collie and Noelie seen ‘em. Two of ‘em, all dressed in black down the church and we were scairt and we run all the way to the mission and we told Uncle Foley and he said they was so! He said they *holy* birriks and he knows’cos he’s wise! (p. 23).

Aboriginality, as depicted in *The Cake Man*, is equivalent to the discovery of pleasure in the midst of much pain. In the author’s own words, ‘I was on a suicidal trip of trying to find beauty where beauty is not expected to be found’.<sup>29</sup> The playwright does succeed in his aim, for the Black Australian family relationship he portrays is both moving and persuasive. In short, Merritt challenges the European

reader or theatre-goer to try to see and appreciate the Aboriginality which *The Cake Man* displays.

Gerald Bostock offers much the same sort of challenge in his *Here Comes the Nigger*, a play which deals above all with the theme of blindness. Bostock engages this theme on a number of different levels: he portrays not only sightlessness, but also the figurative blindness resulting from racism and the colour blindness which enables one to overcome racial prejudice. This is made explicit by the excerpt of his poetry with which the play was advertised:

What is colour  
What is blue and what is white  
Can colour be distinguished in the darkness of night?<sup>30</sup>

Bostock's play is a fast-paced, modern and violent examination of the disabilities – both physical and mental – which afflict urban Aborigines in contemporary Australia. It is an extremely powerful and pointed piece of work which, unlike all the other Black Australian plays, mounts to an intense climax at the very end. As a result, its atmosphere is episodic and cinematographic.

The two major characters in the play are a blind Aboriginal poet named Sam Matthews and a white woman, Odette O'Brien, who is tutoring him for his HSC examinations. They gradually develop an affectionate relationship and (though the playwright is careful never to portray a sexual dimension) those round the pair are convinced that each is sexually taking advantage of the other. Bostock is very strong in his lucid illustration of racist and sexual stereotypes employed on both sides of the colour line. As Sam's brother Billy says, 'You know what these gubbah [European] women are like. They can screw you right up'<sup>31</sup> and his girlfriend Verna adds, 'You know what they say: if ya start mixin' with that white stuff too much it might rub off on ya!' (p. 18). Similarly, Odette's brother Neil warns, 'You know what they say about white women who muck around with black men. They say they've got a sweet tooth; that they're partial to the taste of licorice sticks' (p. 87). These racist and sexual misconceptions can be very destructive, Bostock suggests, and the near-tragic ending of the play is a direct result of their operation.

Though the two main characters do largely succeed in achieving 'colour blindness', they become victims of an environment which is all too attuned to racial differences. It is significant that this environment is the city, for *Here Comes the Nigger* is the first Black Australian play to

be set in an urban milieu. As a result, police harassment is ubiquitous, the Aboriginal dialogue is often enlivened by the patois of the urban sub-culture and the pace of the action is rapid. It is equally significant that Bostock's poetry is highlighted in the play and is integrated quite plausibly into the production. As the author admits, one of his reasons for writing *Here Comes the Nigger* was to 'give people a dose of my poetry'<sup>32</sup> and this he does, especially when Billy recites Sam's [Bostock's] poem 'Black Children' to the wild acclaim of a group of Aborigines gathered for a party. Both his themes and his poetic technique enable Bostock to introduce a pan-Aboriginal element into the work, for the Black Australian urban experience is a similar one throughout the country.

The urban black concept of Aboriginality which Bostock explores in *Here Comes the Nigger* involves almost daily violence, but also underlines the solidarity of the city-dwelling blacks. Like all of the Aboriginal dramatists, Bostock has captured realistic situations and naturalistic dialogue. There is such power and immediacy in his work that, according to the author, both black and white members of the audience were sometimes physically affected by viewing the play:

The only way to get the message across was to show people what it was really like in Redfern. White people would write in saying they couldn't sleep after the performance. White girls would say to me, 'We're not like that! We're not like that!', and others were getting so harassed they'd leave the show.<sup>33</sup>

Significantly for Bostock, one of the most important criteria of dramatic success is immediate and observable impact upon the audience. This largely explains why he has devoted his energies to film and television script-work since the performance of *Here Comes the Nigger* in 1976. What is also important is that his sometimes frank polemicism is mitigated by a buoyant vein of largely sexual humour, which permeates the entire play. For example, Sam and Verna trade suggestiveness throughout almost an entire scene:

VERNA:                   Gettin' any lately, big brother? . . .  
 SAM:                     I know love's suppose t'be blind . . . but I ain't found anyone that  
                               blind enough yet!  
 VERNA:                 [*giving him a sexy hug*] Nemmine. Ah still loves ya, honey! [*He gives  
                               her a playful slap on the backside*]  
 SAM:                     [*smiles*] Garn, ya gin. I bet ya say that t'all us handsome blackfellas!  
 VERNA:                 [*She snaps her fingers and wriggles her hips*] Whell . . . white may be  
                               right, but black is beautiful! Anyway, I'd rather be a slack black than  
                               an uptight white! . . .  
 VERNA:                 I know what's wrong with him. He's sex-starved, the bastard!

- SAM: This could be true!  
VERNA: Too bloody right, it's true! But then, so am I.  
SAM: You gins are all the same, hey?  
VERNA: I don't see any of you black-fellas knockin' us back.<sup>34</sup>

This type of repartee is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, Bostock obviously displays an indebtedness to the Black American idiom as well as to the urban dialect of his own people – an indication of the international influences in his drama. Second, the lecherous tone is intentional and no offence is taken. Third, such banter takes place in the play only between Aborigines and is therefore a type of cultural signifier. Fourth, the laughter is characteristically interspersed with seriousness; for example, this exchange is immediately followed by Verna's angry outburst concerning the major health problems of rural Aborigines in South Australia. This social criticism is then immediately followed by a return to 'sexual' dialogue:

- VERNA: Ya know what they say about the Old Red Ned puts lead in ya pencil!  
SAM: S'no good having lead in your pencil if you got no bastard to write to.<sup>35</sup>

Bostock's technique of intermittent levity – common to all the Aboriginal drama produced so far – releases the pressure of vitriol and resentment. In addition, the humour reflects, both linguistically and symbolically, a unified urban Aboriginal group. Therefore, it not only creates light relief but also signifies membership in the Black Australian sub-culture and subscription to its mores. Thus Aboriginality, as Bostock reflects it, is besieged but defiant, and as vibrant as the humour in *Here Comes the Nigger*.

Aboriginality, as some White Australian dramatists have attempted to portray it, has amounted to many things. Katharine Susannah Prichard made it a symbol of the sexual life-force in *Bramby Innes*, David Ireland largely equated it with depression and depravity in his *Image in the Clay*, and it became the representation of the outcast in Dymphna Cusack's wartime drama, *Shoulder the Sky*. In Bill Reed's *Truganinni* Aboriginality was the image of tragic extinction; it was tantamount to degradation and sexual temptation in Dorothy Hewett's *The Man from Mukinupin* and a serious liability in the workplace in Jill Shearer's brave attempt to mirror the impact of contemporary urban prejudice, *The Foreman*. There are few White Australian playwrights who have celebrated aspects of Black

Australian culture as thoroughly as the Aboriginal dramatists; even fewer who have managed to depict Aborigines as plausible individuals rather than as symbolic representations. Hardly any European playwrights have even approximated the distinctive Black Australian approach to humour.

There is a brief glimmering of resemblance in George Landen Dann's *Fountains Beyond*, in the exchanges between the characters Wally and Peggy:

WALLY: Hello, beautiful one!

PEGGY: Wally! . . . I should of guess it was you – making all that noise. I got a good mind I stick this fork into you.

WALLY: I couldn't take it . . . too tough!<sup>36</sup>

Despite Dann's undoubted sympathy for Black Australians and his careful construction of an Aboriginal fringe-dwelling locale, the dialogue of the black characters is generally stylised and posed – as is the erudite diction of the visiting British author, Miss Harnett. The most significant aspect of *Fountains Beyond* is that it illustrates the dominant viewpoint at the time it was written, that the fringe-dwellers were inevitably doomed to extinction. In Miss Harnett's words:

For people like you who have lived for years on the outskirts of towns, there is no hope. It is too late to hold out hope. In time you shall pass away and the townspeople shall heave sighs of relief.<sup>37</sup>

As Dann's work shows, sympathy and fine intentions are no guarantee of naturalistic dialogue.

Even White Australian dramatists who have researched the topic have failed to reproduce Aboriginal experience. An excellent case in point is Thomas Keneally's *Bullie's House*. His play illustrates the risks of misinterpretation which befall even the best-intentioned European writers. Keneally bases his play upon an incident described by R.M. Berndt in his 1962 monograph entitled, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*. Berndt's book details a movement amongst the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Elcho Island mission in which the tribe's *ranga*, or sacred objects, were put on public display in totemic fashion. In the original incident, two individuals – Buramara and Badanga – were primarily responsible. The former was attempting to come to terms with the fact that a willy-willy had totally destroyed his hut while by-passing all the others on the island, while the latter was simultaneously a "headman" for the Elcho Island people' and a Methodist 'church elder'.

Buramara was on the horns of a dilemma because some local leaders had informed him that the destruction of his hut was a dreaming 'manifestation' . . . 'to punish him because he had not fulfilled all his ritual obligations', while others assured him that God had sent the willy-willy upon him 'because he had been backsliding'<sup>38</sup> in a Christian sense. *Bullie's House* takes this incident as its starting point and explores the dilemma of Buramara (whom Keneally renames Bulumbil or Bullie), and his resultant attempts to atone for the wrongs he believes he has committed. He also introduces a love triangle in which Bullie is 'sung' by Doolie, the wife of his friend Mallie, and adds a stereotyped Professor of Anthropology, a representative of the Department of Native Affairs, and a Methodist minister.

The distinctiveness of Black Australian plays is thrown into clear relief when it is contrasted with the largely unsuccessful efforts of playwrights such as Keneally to employ a Black Australian idiom. The speech the author gives his Aboriginal characters is sometimes appropriate, but is more often lacklustre and unconvincing. Of course, this is as much a function of Keneally's limitations as a dramatist as it is of his inability to penetrate the Aboriginal worldview.

As a result of ethnocentricity rather than malice, Keneally significantly misinterprets the importance of the display of the *ranga* upon which his work hinges. Through this misconception, Bullie and his cronies are reduced to little more than simple-minded lusters after European culture – and material goods. In Bullie's words:

Why did I want to bring out the *ranga*? That's what you want to know. It's a gift, like Barraga says. There isn't any other gift as big as that. And we wanted gifts back. And we'll get them, too, because the Professor's here to see the *ranga* we brought out.<sup>39</sup>

The others add:

MALLIE: We want that generator they wouldn't give us.  
BARRIE: And the air pump –  
MALLIE: And the gear, the whole kit. And the teacher to show the young blokes how to dive for shell . . . (p. 46)

According to the author, Bullie promoted the unveiling of the *ranga* not only to expiate the sin that caused the destruction of his house but also, because he wished to receive in return 'the spiritual

genius of the Europeans summed up in a few visible symbols . . . in some potent and magical and easily presentable symbols'.<sup>40</sup> But there is an inherent difficulty (if not an impossibility) involved in this formula: that which is 'magical' is not normally 'easily presentable' and is, moreover, degraded by its expression in material terms. Hence, though Keneally has attempted to depict the display of the *ranga* as a symbolic olive branch – a means of detente between Christianity and traditional Aboriginal religion – the impression one is left with upon reading the work is that Bullie wants, above all, to learn how to live his life according to the European pattern.

However, Berndt's monograph – the stated source for the play – illustrates that the fundamental reason for the unveiling of the sacred objects was the Aborigines' desire to demonstrate the richness of their culture and, thereby, to assert their independence and autonomy. In Berndt's words:

These eastern Arnhem Landers, generally speaking, see no virtue in being 'like' Europeans. Indeed, they are sometimes told they never can be . . . What they desire is merely a greater amount of control over their own affairs, politically and religiously, and in relation to education and employment.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, though Keneally did attempt to base his play upon an event which 'actually happened',<sup>42</sup> he had no idea that two of the protagonists were still alive. These Aboriginal men actually viewed a production of *Bullie's House* and it comes as no surprise that 'at a meeting back in their country they voted unanimously against the play'.<sup>43</sup> It is unfortunate that the research which Keneally did undertake was both insufficient and misconceived. To his credit, he at least had the courage to admit the difficulties he encountered:

It's very hard for a novelist or a playwright to stick to the facts. I think he ought to make sure that his *creative* distortions are in line with what the meaning of the event was . . . There are a number of things that happened when I began writing the play *Bullie's House* which taught me great lessons . . . I had no idea that the man who had presented the *ranga* . . . was still alive, and in fact had not received a full detente from the Europeans as a result of his act of enormous generosity – had in fact suffered a more subtle punishment: he'd become an MBE.<sup>44</sup>

As *Bullie's House* illustrates, Aboriginality is a very difficult theme for a White Australian dramatist to express in a persuasive way, especially when the author's talent falls short of his or her ambitiousness.

In the work of Jack Davis, his talent as a dramatist and his ambition to express Aboriginality in literature are extremely well balanced.

Davis has had to rely for his historical sources upon documentary material almost entirely amassed by whites and housed in White Australian institutions. Yet he avoids some of the pitfalls which Keneally encountered because his facts *are*, in the latter's words, 'creative distortions in line with what the meaning of the event was'. *Kullark* is an occasional, admittedly partisan play which was created by the impetus to 'set the record straight' in Western Australia. It achieves this – and more – partly by integrating relevant facts and figures into the production, but primarily by offering the reader careful characterisation and precise dialogue. This gives the drama a veracity which no catalogue of statistics could provide. Davis has an uncomplicated, poetic apprehension of colloquial Black Australian speech and he has also had a life-long exposure to the dialogue of White Australians. For both reasons, *Kullark* displays a tone of simple and honest naturalism.

In addition to being the Aboriginal dramatist most indebted to traditional black oral literature, he is also the playwright who has some of the most insightful observations to make upon contemporary Black Australian society. In *Kullark* Davis perceptively illustrates the range in Aboriginal socio-political attitudes, and the fact that there is a genuine ambivalence on the part of many Black Australians confronted with what they believe is radicalism. The Aboriginal mother and father, Alec and Rosie, exemplify these misgivings:

- ROSIE:                You know, I'm startin' to worry about Jamie.  
ALEC:                 Why, 'e looks alright to me.  
ROSIE:                I dunno, 'e don't seem happy to me.  
ALEC:                 All them land rights an' that. 'E's too much mixed up with them white students, if you ask me.  
ROSIE:                Well, what's wrong with land rights and that? Young people stick together more these days, that's all.  
ALEC:                 Yeah, but those Wetjalas'll lead him on, an when the chips are down he'll be out on 'is ear.<sup>45</sup>

Davis, more than any other Aboriginal dramatist, has captured the feel of the gap in attitudes and beliefs between Black Australian generations. He is also an extremely astute observer of personal inconsistencies and foibles. This enables him to develop one of his strengths, which is the genial highlighting of the ironies and self-contradictions which are part of Aboriginal life in a predominantly White Australian society. For example, Alec displays his own version of the motto, 'there is an exception to every rule', when he is discussing whom Jamie should marry:

- ALEC: That ain't got nothing to do with it, I don't want im marryin' no *Wetjala yok* [white woman].
- ROSIE: You're just plain bloody racist.
- ALEC: No I'm not, but 'e's a *Nyoongah* like you and me, and 'e should marry a *Nyoongah*.
- ROSIE: What about your sister Mary? She's married to a *Wetjala*.
- ALEC: Aw, that's different. Ol' Bill, 'e's all right.
- ROSIE: Yeah, specially when 'e brings you a flagon around now an' again (p. 17).

The play is in three sections, and in all of them Davis develops the theme of independent and sustained Aboriginal resistance. All the way through, whites figure as invaders and/or intruders, whether fought against, served under, or grudgingly invited home. The keynote of the entire play is the sentiment of the poem with which Davis ends it:

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 (p. 66).

Significantly, according to Davis, one of the most visible ways Aborigines have survived the white onslaught is through reliance upon each other, upon their traditions, and upon their distinctive mores; in short, through Aboriginality itself. Again, humour is an integral part of the equation. For example, organised religion comes in for some light-hearted ridicule in *Kullark* when Alec describes the local missionary as a 'bookie's clerk':

You know, 'e can't lose – it's like an each way bet: If 'e can't get ya to 'is church that don't matter, 'e'll still get to 'eaven 'cause 'e tried. It's even better than an each way bet, because 'e bets on the whole bloody field (p. 9).

Alec and Rosie fortify their lively relationship by feuding repeatedly over his drinking. As he pours himself a glass of wine he admits, 'You know, in the twenty five years we've been together I never won an argument yet', and Rosie replies, 'And if you drink that you won't win this one either' (p. 17). The sexual innuendo is more subtle than in *Here Comes the Nigger*, but it is present nonetheless:

- ALEC: Yeah, you went to a lot of trouble, borrowin that bed an' mattress orf that flamin' do-gooder Lyn what's'er-name.
- ROSIE: Here you go again. Any *Wetjala* does you a favour you call 'em a do-gooder.

- ALEC: Just because she lent you a bed an' mattress you think the sun shines out of her *kwon*. Wouldn't mind betting she'll be around to share the bed with 'im before too long.
- ROSIE: You dirty-minded ol' bastard.
- ALEC: [*laughing*] Watch your language, love, watch your language. [*Suddenly disgruntled*] We never needed the flamin' bed, anyway (p.16).

In the play published in tandem with *Kullark – The Dreamers* – it is Davis's attention to even minute details of scene and language which establishes the Aboriginal atmosphere of the play consistently, plausibly and entertainingly. It is a far more personal play than *Kullark*, not only because Davis wrote it envisaging himself in the lead role of Worrui, but because one sees the many sides of the Wallitch family: their happiness and sorrow, their quarrels and togetherness, their drunkenness and sobriety. The play is written without artifice, without embarrassment and frequently, with lyrical sensitivity.

The *Nyoongah* language, the repeated framing of scenes with traditional Aboriginal music and dance, and the awareness of otherness which the young black children of the Wallitch family possess, all clearly indicate the continued strength of a separate sense of Aboriginality. Twelve-year-old Shane knows few *Nyoongah* words, but he can still remark to his white friend Darren: 'I know what *Wetjala* is, that's you'.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, when his fourteen-year-old sister, Meena, is preparing to go out with her boyfriend he counsels her to 'watch it', not for reasons we might expect, but because 'he might be a relation, you know we got hundreds of 'em' (p.113).

In many respects, *The Dreamers* is a marvellous work. Linguistically, its consistent usage of *Nyoongah* challenges the White Australian reader or member of the audience. For one of the few times in Australian literature, it makes her or him feel a stranger in the continent which, after all, has been occupied by Europeans for only two hundred years. As a result of this, and because of the strong awareness of Aboriginal history and traditional oral literature in which it is steeped, *The Dreamers* is one of the most culturally independent and autonomous Black Australian theatrical statements to date. It truly breaks new ground in the field of Australian drama. As Robert Hodge has observed:

Aboriginal words weave through the dialogue, making no concessions to White ignorance, so that Whites simply have to put up with the unselfconscious exclusion

of them and their language that so many Aboriginals have endured at greater length: they have less chance of understanding 'Milbert, yuarl nyinaliny gnularah', for instance, than Shane . . . has of knowing that London is the capital of England. This salutary experience for Whites of being part of a disregarded, peripheral culture is intensified if there are a large number of Aboriginals in the audience, becoming a majority as well as a dominant culture, guffawing uninhibitedly with the joy of recognition of Aboriginal life affirmed on a public stage.<sup>47</sup>

As Hodge illustrates, though the European reader might be daunted by the seeming inaccessibility of some of the language of the play, the effort which is required to come to terms with it is a valuable cultural experience. The challenge to the audience is also insignificant when compared with the effort which Davis has invested in *The Dreamers* to make it one of the most lucid statements of Aboriginality in Black Australian literature.

Both *Kullark* and *The Dreamers* are, in quite different ways, celebrations. The former shows the reverse side of the Western Australian commemoration of its sesquicentenary, which also represented 150 years of oppression and exploitation of Aborigines. The latter is a celebration of what it is to be an urban Aboriginal, despite hypocrisy, untruths, and the constant pressure of the surrounding European world. There is no clearer sense in which *The Dreamers* becomes an oasis of Aboriginality in the Australian theatre than through its engaging and distinctive humour. One scene crystallises the conflicting dictates of traditional Aboriginal religion and modern Christianity very amusingly. The Wallitch family is sitting down to a meal of roast kangaroo:

SHANE: Do we only say grace when we are eating kangaroo?  
 ROY: [putting his spoon back on his plate and swallowing] We thank you, Lord, for what –  
 WORRU: You put bacon in this?  
 ROY: We thank you –  
 WORRU: Bacon, *wah?*  
 SHANE: Ssh, ssh, Popeye, close your eyes.  
 ROY: We thank you, Lord.  
 WORRU: What for? Can't eat with me eyes closed.  
 ROY: We thank you, Lord, for what we have got.  
 WORRU: [to SHANE, pointing upwards] I forgot about that fella up there.  
 ROY: Oh Gawd! (pp. 102-103).

The humour is decidedly vibrant, especially when enlivened by drinking and verbal competition:

- ELI: Look, I tell you, I played full forward for Federals in Wagin. One match I kicked ten goals, right through the big sticks. [*He demonstrates*]
- ROY: Full forward. [*Laughing*] Full and forward, belly up to the bar and then you got kicked right outa the pub! (p. 125)

The irony of the typically black situations Davis brings to life is equally impressive. For example, the shiftiest and most unreliable member of the family, Eli, reports upon his day's success in begging at the shopping centre, while wearing a false eye patch:

- ELI: Yeah, we were doin' all right outside the shopping centre today, yeah, gettin' fifty cents a bite. One *wetjala* bloke, hippy, he give me two dollars.
- WORRU: *Kia*, two dollar.
- ELI: Anyways, some of them *Nyoongahs* spotted me. There they was: 'Give me fifty cents, brother', 'Give me a dollar, nephew', 'Give me fifty cents, uncle'; and you know none of them black bastards are related to me. That's true. Pop, I never seen blackfellas like 'em, the real bloody dinkum out and out bludgers. Can't stand the bastards (p. 105).

Though it is far less emphasised than in the plays of Gilbert and Bostock, the sexual theme is again dealt with in a humorous vein by Davis. For example, when Meena defends her boyfriend from her mother's criticism, she starts out on dry land but ends up in deep water:

- MEENA: What's wrong with Ross's car? He's got a V8 panel van and he's done it up real nice, got an air conditioner, stereo, bed and . . . and . . .
- DOLLY: Yeah, I bet he has. You make sure you're home by ten o'clock (pp. 116-117).

In *The Dreamers* as in *Kullark*, humour is a vital component of the distinctive Aboriginal self-image. There is realistic violence, sorrow and suffering in both, but Davis conveys such an honest tenderness in his black characterisation and such a believable emphasis upon Aboriginal uniqueness, humour and endurance, that the sense which remains at the end is bittersweet: a feeling of stubborn faith in the face of loss. Perhaps this is the most accurate adjective to use when describing Aboriginality as well: a sense that while all can never be regained, all will never be lost.

Davis returns to an explicitly historical theme in *No Sugar*, first published in 1986. Although written three years after *The Dreamers*, *No Sugar* actually precedes it thematically and chronologically. *No Sugar* is the first part of Davis's dramatic trilogy focussing upon the past half-century of Aboriginal history in Western Australia, which *The Dreamers* continues and the as-yet unpublished *Barungin* (*Smell the Wind*) completes. The play highlights the oppression of institutionalised Aborigines by focussing on the story of the Millimurra family, the ancestors of the Wallitch clan of *The Dreamers*. Forcibly removed from Government Well near Northam to the Moore River Native Settlement, the Millimurras represent Aborigines throughout Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, coerced to live in areas far removed from White Australians.

*No Sugar* is very faithful to the historical record, so much so that documented massacres are dealt with as an integral part of the drama. Davis's treatment of Aboriginal history is, as always, intriguing. He manages to establish a simultaneous position as chronicler of, and participant in, the Black Australian past. He achieves this by alternating between European styles of historical narration – as when A.O. Neville addresses the Royal Western Australian Historical Society – and Aboriginal dialogue, in which the rhythms of colloquial speech and usage of *Nyoongah* alter the entire atmosphere of the story. Billy's recounting of the Oombulgarri [Umbali] Massacre is made much more vivid in this way:

- BILLY: Big mob politjmans, and big mob from stations, and shoot 'em everybody mens, *koories*, little *yumbah*. [*He grunts and mimes pulling a trigger.*] They chuck 'em on a big fire, chuck 'em in river. [*They sit in silence, mesmerized and shocked by BILLY'S gruesome story.*]
- JIMMY: Anybody left, your mob?
- BILLY: Not many, gid away, hide. But no one stop that place now, they all go 'nother country.
- JOE: Why?
- BILLY: You go there, night time you hear 'em. I bin bring cattle that way for Wyndham Meat Works. I hear 'em. Mothers cryin' and babies cryin', screamin'. *Waiwai! Waiwai! Waiwai!*<sup>48</sup>

Although it is less technically adventurous than *The Dreamers*, *No Sugar* is equally notable for its vibrant, often amusing dialogue. One of Davis's greatest skills is his ability to balance conflict – between police and prisoners, 'Protectors' and their charges, Magistrates and defendants – through his usage of repartee which is as irreverent as it is appropriate:

- SERGEANT: Yeah, and you tell that bush lawyer brother of yours, if he comes here arguing I'll make him jump: straight inside. [*They turn to go. As they leave he raises his voice after them.*] You hear me?
- MILLY: [*calling*] Yeah, I hear you. Can't help hearin' you. [*They walk down the street.*]
- GRAN: [*calling*] You don't want to shout like that, Chergeant. You'll have a fit, just like a dingo when he gets bait.
- MILLY: [*calling*] Seein' you're drinkin down the Federal every night, Sergeant, you can tell old Skinny Martin to stick his stag ram right up his skinny *kwon!*
- GRAN: [*calling*] Yeah, an' the boots too (p. 23).

The humour is often critical but is never really offensive:

- SERGEANT: Look, there's nothing I can do about it except put in a reminder to the Department in Perth. Why don't youse go around to St John's and ask the vicar?
- MILLY: For blankets? He'll give us nothin', he's like that.
- GRAN: [*adopting a praying attitude*] Yeah, when he come to Gubment Well he goes like that with his eyes closed and he says the Lord will help you, and now he prays with his eyes open, 'cause time 'fore last Wow Wow bit him on the leg . . . musta wanted a bit a' holy meat (p. 43).

Davis also establishes basic motifs which resurface throughout the play, such as tobacco (called 'nigger twist' [p. 43]); soap (requested by the blacks and denied by the whites); and, most effectively, sugar. The Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, admonishes Jimmy with the words, 'Munday, let me give you a piece of advice: sugar catches more flies than vinegar' (p. 39). But the truth is, as the play's title indicates, that the Aborigines have 'no sugar', both literally and figuratively. As they sing on Christmas Day at Moore River, in a parody which enrages Neville:

There is a happy land,  
Far, far away,  
No sugar in our tea,  
Bread and butter we never see.  
That's why we're gradually  
Fading away (p. 98).

The tightness and cleverness of the play's structure demonstrates that Davis has extended the range of his dramatic writing even further in *No Sugar. Barungin (Smell the Wind)* both completes his dramatic trilogy and establishes Davis as the most ambitious and accomplished Aboriginal playwright.<sup>49</sup>

*Barungin* is Davis's most overtly political and accusatory play, set in the context of the Bicentennial and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Its final scene cuts so close to the bone that newspaper headlines concerning black deaths are projected on the set as a vital component of the impassioned climax. At times, the barriers between the audience and the players break down more completely than in any of Davis's previous plays. At one stage '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'.

Once again, the distinctive naturalism of Black Australian drama is underlined – a trademark of all the Aboriginal plays written to date. And again, Davis's irrepressible sense of humour shines through, as the Wallitch family plays 'Trivial Pursuit' together, as they discuss Captain James Cook ('Jim the Ripper') and as Christian and non-Christian Aborigines are compared:

ROBERT:                [Gesturing skywards] I got the right fella looking after me.  
 PEEGUN:                [With disdain] Jesus!  
 ROBERT:                That's him!

In May 1988, Davis realised a long-standing dream 'that during the Bicentennial year Australians would be able to see the complete trilogy under the title *The First-born*'<sup>50</sup> when all three plays were performed in sequence at the Fitzroy Town Hall. This was a triumph for Davis, and for what reviewer Dennis Davison termed 'the hidden side of Australia':

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.<sup>51</sup>

It has to be added that Davis's success at weaving together observations of his people, his poetry and his wise humour have made him a world-class dramatist of whom all Australians should be proud.

The question then arises: 'Just how important to Black Australians as a whole – and specifically, to the Aboriginal movement – are the black playwrights?' Davis strongly believes in the worth of writing, as opposed to some forms of political activism and demonstration:

I think they're [Aboriginal writers] the most important thing we've got . . . you could put up a tent today and people would laugh at it . . . now, it's time for the people with the pen to take over.<sup>52</sup>

Brian Syron concurs that Aboriginal writers are a cogent, articulate and representative voice:

We are fighting through art. This is the healthy alternative to the radicals. The radicals are a 'Mickey Mouse' reproduction of United States and Great Britain radicals.<sup>53</sup>

Leila Rankine is equally optimistic:

I think, hopefully, through writers, through artists, and through the art form, we can be able to do more than maybe even governments to try and bring about change.<sup>54</sup>

However, though many Black Australians feel that Aboriginal literature – and especially drama – can help to effect social change, others are not convinced. For example, with reference to performances of *The Cake Man*, Charles Perkins makes the point that:

Some people would probably accept it fully and sort of fit it into their mind just what is happening in Aboriginal Affairs, and it would develop their understanding as a consequence. But others would probably take it on the night . . . for entertainment value and leave it at that and say, 'Oh yes, very good; great fun' – and then forget about it.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, it is difficult to quantify the impact of drama in this way. What can be said is that, if Black Australian plays are only performed in standard Australian theatres and are not, for example, taken to the streets and parks and Aboriginal settlements of the country, very few black people will be able to see the works. Moreover, there is a sense in which many Australian theatre-goers would not pay to view a play such as *The Dreamers* or *No Sugar* unless they already sympathised to some extent with the Aboriginal cause. In short, as currently performed, Aboriginal drama is preaching to the converted to a significant extent.

For these reasons, John Newfong is sceptical about the ability of Black Australian playwrights to effect any socio-political change through their works:

I know there is a view being expressed . . . that things are going to change through the arts . . . but I don't see those things really changing at all while the arts remain elitist . . . As far as the impact of theatre goes in Australia – and you're not dealing with a theatre-going public in Australia – as far as it has an influence on Australian thinking, I think plays like *The Cake Man* and Jack Davis's plays *have* had an enormous influence . . . But if you're talking about direct influence, 'No'. I mean *The Cake Man* is not going to change the budget for the ADC. *The Cake Man* is not going to get land rights. *The Cake Man* will create an awareness over and above an awareness that any political spokesman can create but, you see, that's a building block for the future.<sup>56</sup>

While Newfong's view is valid as far as it goes, it arguably does not tell the entire story. Aboriginal public servants and dramatists alike are bounded by the dictates of their own horizons, interests and employment. For example, the view that Aboriginal radicalism – and the capacity to achieve significant socio-political gains – has been silenced by the co-option of leading Aborigines into government departments is frequently voiced by activists as well as by authors. It is also true (and Newfong admits as much<sup>57</sup>) that political advances for Aboriginal people can be very transitory, while attitudinal change is often far more long-lasting. Finally, it is possible that the international and domestic impact of Aboriginal literature – and drama in particular – help to create a climate of opinion which favourably influences the Australian government to make political concessions to Black Australians. Hence, the most balanced view is that while there are few direct and observable socio-political consequences of Aboriginal drama, its importance as a means of furthering the Black Australian cause should not be underestimated.

There are two final factors which must not be overlooked, one of which is education. Theatre may be elitist but education is universal, and it is in the schools and universities of Australia that plays such as *The Cake Man*, *The Dreamers* and *No Sugar* will have their most significant effect. Already, in recognition of their literary worth and socio-political relevance, all have been accepted for inclusion in the syllabuses of major state high school systems. Lastly, Aboriginal drama has the potential for effective conversion into the media of film, video, and television,<sup>58</sup> all of which would greatly enhance the exposure and impact of the works themselves.

Education and the mass media are two of the most potent means by which the portrayal of Aboriginality can be disseminated throughout Australia. While the Black Australian view of Black Australians is multi-faceted, it is also one which more and more Australians of all racial backgrounds will encounter in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When they do, the seemingly irrepressible humour which is an integral part of Aboriginality will be one of the most persuasive ambassadors for Black Australian literature.

## Notes

- 1 Kevin Gilbert, *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert*, (Ringwood, 1978), p. 184.
- 2 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 193.
- 3 Personal interview with Robert Merritt, Sydney, July, 1982.
- 4 Personal interview with Charles Perkins, Canberra, January, 1983.
- 5 Quoted by Patti Watts in her article 'Plea for Assistance', *The West Australian*, 17 July 1980, p. 58.
- 6 Personal interview with Anna Haebich, Canberra, November, 1980.
- 7 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview with Jack Davis', *Westerly*, vol. 27, no. 4, December, 1982, p. 112.
- 8 W.E.H. Stanner, 'Aboriginal Humour', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 6, part 1, June, 1982, p. 41.
- 9 Personal interview with John Newfong, Canberra, July, 1982.
- 10 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview with Jack Davis', *Westerly*, vol. 27, no. 4, December, 1982, pp. 114-115.
- 11 Personal interview with Robert Merritt, Sydney, July, 1982.
- 12 Stanner, 'Aboriginal Humour', p. 41.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 43.
- 14 These events were related by Bostock during a workshop session of the first National Aboriginal Writers' Conference, Murdoch University, Perth, February, 1983.
- 15 *The Cherry Pickers* was released by an independent Canberra press, Burrumbinga Books, in May, 1988. This was timed to coincide with the Aboriginal protests during the opening of the new Australian Parliament House by Queen Elizabeth II.
- 16 Kevin Gilbert, *The Cherry Pickers*, Typescript, Canberra: National Library of Australia, mss. no. 2584, 1970, p. 22. All further quotations from *The Cherry Pickers* will be taken from this manuscript version, and page numbers will be included in parentheses in the body of the text immediately after each citation.

- 17 Kevin Gilbert, *Ghosts in Cell Ten*, unpublished typescript, Canberra, National Library of Australia, ms. no. 2584, 1979, p. 1. All further quotations will be taken from this version of the play, and page references will be given in parentheses immediately after each citation, in the body of the text.
- 18 Pat O'Shane's speech was delivered to students of the Australian National University, Canberra, on 26 February, 1983.
- 19 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, (Sydney, 1982), p. 183.
- 20 Pat O'Shane's speech at the ANU, Canberra, February, 1983.
- 21 Personal interview with Candy Williams, Sydney, July, 1980.
- 22 Personal interview with John Newfong, Canberra, July, 1982.
- 23 Robert J. Merritt, *The Cake Man*, (Sydney, 1978), pp. 32-33. All further quotations will be taken from this edition and page references will be included in the body of the text, immediately after each citation.
- 24 Personal interview with Brian Syron, Canberra, May, 1981.
- 25 Personal interview with Robert Merritt, Sydney, July, 1982.
- 26 Personal interview with John Newfong, Canberra, July, 1982.
- 27 There is a body of American psycho-social work which lends support to Newfong's theory concerning the de facto emasculation of Black Australian men. For example, Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, in their *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro*, (Cleveland, 1962) note that 'The lower-class Negro female cannot be 'feminine', nor the male 'masculine'. Their roles are reversed. Since these values are just the opposite from what they are in white society, and since the values of white society are inescapable, the male fears and hates the female; the female mistrusts and has contempt for the male because he cannot validate his nominal masculinity in practice' (p. 349). However, Newfong's conclusion is flatly contradicted by more recent scholarly analyses of specifically Australian sexual oppression, such as Anne Summers's *Damned Whores and God's Police*, (Ringwood, 1975).
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 Personal interview with Robert Merritt, Sydney, July, 1982.
- 30 The advertising poster for *Here Comes the Nigger*, reproduced in *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, December, 1977, p. 482.
- 31 Gerry Bostock, *Here Comes the Nigger*, Third draft of filmscript, Typescript kindly provided by the author, Sydney, 1980, p. 13. All further quotations will be taken from this version of the play except where noted, and page references will be given immediately after each citation, in the body of the text.

- 32 Personal interview with Gerry Bostock, Sydney, July, 1980.
- 33 Personal interview with Gerry Bostock, Sydney, July, 1980.
- 34 Gerry Bostock, 'Two Scenes from *Here Comes the Nigger*', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, December, 1977, p. 483.
- 35 *ibid.*, p. 485.
- 36 George Landen Dann, *Fountains Beyond*, (Melbourne, 1942[?]), p. 9.
- 37 *ibid.*, p. 68.
- 38 Ronald M. Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*, (Paris, 1962), p. 34.
- 39 Thomas Keneally, *Bullie's House*, (Sydney, 1981), p. 44. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page references will be included in parentheses in the body of the text, immediately after each citation.
- 40 Personal interview with Thomas Keneally, Brisbane, September, 1982.
- 41 Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement*, p. 87.
- 42 Personal interview with Thomas Keneally, Brisbane, September, 1982.
- 43 Bob Maza, 'Introduction', in *Bullie's House*, p. xv.
- 44 Personal interview with Thomas Keneally, Brisbane, September, 1982.
- 45 Jack Davis, *Kullark*, in *Kullark/The Dreamers*, (Sydney, 1982), pp. 43-44. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page references will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, immediately after each citation.
- 46 *ibid.*, p. 97.
- 47 Robert Hodge, 'A Case for Aboriginal Literature', *Meridian*, vol. 3, no. 1, May, 1984, p. 85.
- 48 Jack Davis, *No Sugar*, (Sydney, 1986), pp. 67-68. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page references will be given in the body of the text, immediately after each citation.
- 49 In 1986, Davis also wrote his first play for children, the highly successful *Honeyspot*. Both *Honeyspot* and *Barungin* enjoyed popular seasons as part of the official 'World Expo on Stage' Australian Drama Series in Brisbane in July–August 1988.
- 50 Wendy Blacklock, 'The Marli Biyol Company', in the World Expo on stage programme for *Barungin* (Sydney, 1988).
- 51 Dennis Davison, 'Honest Look at the Hidden Side of Society', *The Australian*, 9 May 1988, p. 10.

- 52 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview With Jack Davis', *Westerly*, vol. 27, no. 4, December, 1982, p. 116.
- 53 Personal interview with Brian Syron, Canberra, May, 1981.
- 54 Personal interview with Leila Rankine, Adelaide, March, 1982.
- 55 Personal interview with Charles Perkins, Canberra, January, 1983.
- 56 Personal interview with John Newfong, Canberra, July, 1982.
- 57 'You may make political gains, but you have to fight to keep them'. Quoted from personal interview with John Newfong, Canberra, July, 1982.
- 58 Merritt's *The Cake Man* has, in fact, already been televised. However, the condensed, one hour-long version which was broadcast on the ABC in 1977 did not do the play full justice.