

# *Talkin' Blak*: Humour in Indigenous Australian Theatre, 1970–2000

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I am not really surprised that my Aboriginal background has been a great asset in theatre. The Nyoongah language was always full of humour and music. Theatre, in a bush area, is the very essence of an Aboriginal corroboree and performances there are often full of brilliant dance and mime.

—Western Australian and Nyoongah playwright and poet, Jack Davis (1917–2000)<sup>1</sup>

FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS, the 1960s and 1970s were significant times within this nation's post-colonial history. By means of stronger public presence, Indigenous people called for greater social justice and cultural recognition. The performing arts proved a powerful avenue for Indigenous Australians to challenge negative assumptions held about them by a great many non-Indigenous Australians. Humour was—and still is—a significant element of this endeavour.

This paper looks at the renaissance of Indigenous Australian theatrical performance, from the early 1970s to its prominence in the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. It focuses on the specific ways that humour has been used by Indigenous Australian performing artists to highlight unpleasant social issues in their communities, such as poverty, alcohol abuse, and the removal/stealing of children from their families.<sup>2</sup> In conjunction with witty rep-

artee, visual comedy both in movement and mimicry is often used by Indigenous performers. Philosopher Henri Bergson, well-known for his contributions to humour studies, claims that the physical humour in inflexible, repetitive, or exaggerated movements is inherently funny.<sup>3</sup> Bergson argues that rigidity of movements or “something mechanical encrusted on the living” makes comedians appear inhuman and, as a consequence, this makes people laugh.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary philosopher and humour theorist Simon Critchley notes that the opposite is also true: We often find it funny when people give the impression of being all too human.<sup>5</sup> For Critchley, the recognition of predictable behaviours is just as funny as any automated actions.<sup>6</sup>

By the turn of the new century, Indigenous plays such as *The Seven Stages of Grieving* and *Box the Pony* focused on Indigenous artists telling autobiographical narratives to mainstream audiences. These later productions in particular often rely on the Indigenous style of oral dialogue known as “yarning.”<sup>7</sup> According to Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng’andu, yarning is a form of cultural communication traditionally used by Indigenous people in conversations.<sup>8</sup> It is an informal storytelling tool and a way of sharing traditional information and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous artists often employ this style of casual communication to draw audiences into their confidence to convince them to consider their traditional knowledge and alternative social perspectives. Christine Watson notes Indigenous women’s autobiographies are personable “acts of witness” with a generic status that promotes a commonality of Indigenous peoples’ experiences and their veracity.<sup>10</sup> Watson writes that “narratives are constructed to affect the audience such that the story might be told or remembered outside the literary space.”<sup>11</sup> Yarning in theatre allows Indigenous performing artists, in a personal and unthreatening manner, to share historical information about the injustices and difficulties faced by many Indigenous people with non-Indigenous audiences. Humour is also an important component of this disarming strategy, and of

these two latter works. At times, both plays incorporate elements of the physical humour noted by Bergson and Critchley. Humour allows Indigenous artists to lighten the negativity surrounding the significant personal and political tragedies of many Indigenous Australian's lives. Psychologist Sigmund Freud, who is also well-known for his humour theories, discussed the functions of humour used by Jewish people within the anti-Semitic environs of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Freud's speculations can frequently be paralleled with the social functions of humour used by Indigenous Australian artists.<sup>13</sup> This paper will investigate the role of humour in Indigenous Australian drama, highlighting the consistent forms and functions of humour in this arena.

## The Socio-Political Backdrop to Humour in Contemporary Indigenous Australian Theatre of the 1970s

The winds of change that saw Indigenous Australians strive for greater political access and amendments to Australia's Constitution gathered into growing public protests and activism in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> All over the country, Indigenous people undertook civil rights campaigns to articulate their communities' social and political desire to be treated as legitimate members of this independent, post-colonial Australian Nation. Federation of 1901 had denied most Indigenous Australians citizenship rights and benefits, leaving these issues to the whims of various States' legislation.<sup>15</sup> By 1962 all Indigenous Australians had finally won the Federal right to vote; however, they were still precluded from State elections in Queensland until 1965.<sup>16</sup> In 1967, two sections of the Australian Constitution were amended as the result of a national referendum. The first amendment was made to Section 52 (xxvi) or the so-called 'race power,' and enabled the Federal Government to assume responsibility and to legislate uniformly for Indigenous people in all states and territories.<sup>17</sup> The

second amendment, to Section 127, allowed for Indigenous Australians to be counted in the national census.<sup>18</sup> While the latter amendment has been identified by many to have allowed for the provision of citizenship rights to Indigenous Australians, this is not strictly true.<sup>19</sup> Citizenship rights had been granted to Indigenous Australians on a state by state basis: that is, in a disjointed and ad hoc fashion.<sup>20</sup> The referendum sought to remove any lingering legal impediments for Indigenous people resulting from their status as ‘protected’ people.<sup>21</sup>

These two amendments effected a national standardisation in the governing of Indigenous Australians that was an important marker for future positive reforms.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it was a significant step towards constituting Indigenous Australians as ‘normalised’ subjects of Australia’s liberal democracy. Indeed, soon after these changes, in 1971, Neville Bonner became the first Indigenous Australian to sit in the Australian Parliament, when he was chosen to fill a casual vacancy in the Senate caused by the resignation of a Queensland senator.<sup>23</sup> Bonner was later elected to this position in 1972, as well as in 1974, 1975, and 1980.<sup>24</sup> In 1972 a Federal Labor Government was elected, following twenty-three years of Liberal government (since 1949).<sup>25</sup> This new government sought to address a broad range of social justice issues pertaining to Indigenous Australians.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it developed a stronger focus on the National Arts, reorganising the Australia Council (formally known as the Council for the Arts) to include specialist subsidiaries, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board, with fifteen Indigenous Australian members.<sup>27</sup> These initiatives gave Indigenous artists greater access to funding, both under the Board as well as through the existing Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs.<sup>28</sup>

The greater social acknowledgment and appreciation of Indigenous people occurred in tandem with these political changes. Some Indigenous Australians, such as Oodgeroo Noonucal (known at that time as Kath Walker) and Kevin Gilbert, achieved a level of

mainstream respect for their literary and artistic works, forms of dramatic and creative writing in which they articulated Indigenous concerns with government policies and called for greater social justice for Indigenous Australians.<sup>29</sup> Oodgeroo is widely acknowledged as the first Indigenous Australian to produce and publish a book of poetry in Australia, with *We are Going* in 1964.<sup>30</sup> Gilbert is credited with writing the first Indigenous play in English, *The Cherry Pickers*, written in 1968 and first performed in 1971.<sup>31</sup> In parallel with these artistic achievements, both writers actively participated in Indigenous political organisations and protest campaigns. From the early 1960s, Oodgeroo was secretary of the Queensland Council for Aboriginal Advancement and Federal coordinator of the campaign for changes to Australia's Constitution.<sup>32</sup> Gilbert also helped establish the Aboriginal Tent Embassy at (old) Parliament House in Canberra in early 1972,<sup>33</sup> a powerful public symbol of Indigenous political protest and calls for land rights claims.<sup>34</sup> The range of developments outlined in the preceding paragraphs led to greater socio-political support and acknowledgment that was essential to the advancement of Indigenous arts and foundational to the establishment of Indigenous Australian theatre.

Black Theatre movements began in Australia in the early 1970s as a direct result, and in support of, this climate of heightened Indigenous social and political activism. These early Indigenous theatre groups were cooperative enterprises that stemmed from mainstream non-Indigenous organisations. Melbourne's New Theatre Movement created the company *Nindethana* in 1972.<sup>35</sup> *Nindethana* is a Victorian Koori word that Indigenous playwright Gerry Bostock defines as "a place for corroboree," or a place for communal gathering.<sup>36</sup> Sydney's first contemporary Indigenous theatre company, *Black Theatre*, originally staged street performances in the early 1970s, supporting Indigenous Australian political protest rallies.<sup>37</sup> In 1972, a Federal Government development fund grant was provided to launch a permanent company, *The National Black Theatre* (NBT).<sup>38</sup>

Like *Nindethana*, this company's first production, *Basically Black*, was a joint project with non-Indigenous theatre group, The Nimrod Theatre Company.<sup>39</sup>

*Basically Black* was a series of satirical sketches presented in revue-style.<sup>40</sup> It was created by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, yet the production had an all Indigenous cast that included Aileen Corpus, Gary Foley, Zac Martin, Bob Maza, and Bindi Williams.<sup>41</sup> According to Indigenous theatre expert Maryrose Casey, "The revue was intended to present the Indigenous view of Australia in a satirical form, not just to entertain but also to communicate with and inform both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences."<sup>42</sup> *Basically Black* presented audiences with a unique Indigenous perspective on Australian life, complete with its socio-political inequalities and racism. Indeed, the stage play was so successful that in 1973, the NBT was approached by the Australian Broadcasting Commission to create a television series.<sup>43</sup> This resulted in the production of only one pilot episode, but this was to become notable as the first Australian television program to have an all-Indigenous cast.<sup>44</sup> Several skits from this pilot can still be found on the Internet.<sup>45</sup> The pilot shows that sketches were often cheeky and arguably quite shocking for their original audience, presenting Australian life with a subversively political and satirical view. One sketch (from the television version) shows black actors wearing white masks, portraying a 'white' crew filming an Indigenous Australian man (Bindi Williams), attired in a stereotypically 'traditional' loincloth, with face and body painting.<sup>46</sup> Williams greets the camera with a broad smile, and says "Good morning. I am a human being." Next, the white-masked director (Bob Maza) cuts the action and, turning to the crew, notes the poor treatment that Indigenous Australian people have received in post-colonial Australia. He implores a sensitive, more politically correct approach to this Indigenous Australian man. Maza then turns to Williams, incongruously stating, "Cue the boong."<sup>47</sup>

This skit plays on, and laughs at, familiar black/white typecasts: the binary of a white person in authority ‘directing’ the actions of a ‘traditional’ Indigenous Australian. The sketch effectively ‘takes the mickey’ out of Indigenous and non-Indigenous stereotypes. According to Australian humour scholar Jessica Milner-Davis, taking the mickey is a form of humour that operates in Australia as an “acculturating ritual.”<sup>48</sup> Assisting in the social assimilation process of reconfirming particular Australian cultural ideologies and norm, it often causes embarrassment and, through this, subliminally ensures that people do not act in a way that is overly pompous.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Australian historian Inga Clendinnen suggests that signs of Indigenous Australians’s delight in taking the mickey out of those in authority can be seen even in records of the first British colonists and their early dealings with Indigenous Australians.<sup>50</sup> In her book *Dancing with Strangers* (2005), Clendinnen highlights the frustrated ruminations recorded by First Officer William Tench in his 1791 account of Indigenous Australians’s laughing and mimicking British slips and stumbles in the foreign Australian landscape.<sup>51</sup> The pilot skit of *Basically Black* also employs the use of visual humour in mimicry. Although attired in traditional ‘savage’ garb, the Aboriginal man, Williams, fidgets and grins in a warm and cheeky manner. His physical appearance and movements express a sense of fun that mocks the very portrayal of the Indigenous stereotype frequently that is identified as fierce and alien to the mainstream Australian public. Bergson claims that comedy depicts characters that we have come across before: “It aims at placing types before our eyes.”<sup>52</sup> Stereotypes trigger understandings in our minds about how characters ought to act. As Critchley notes, we often laugh when we recognise predictable human behaviours in all their habitual absurdity.<sup>53</sup> However, the subversive nature of Indigenous actors playing roles that mock and mimic themselves, as well as white stereotypes, provides a disarming element of surprise and contrast that Bergson also notes as particular to the comic tradition.<sup>54</sup> Indigenous academic

Lillian Holt suggests that Indigenous Australian humour is cathartic, bringing “perspective and relief” to the issues at play.<sup>55</sup> Holt says that this humour, in part, is “a spoofing of the stereotypes, both black and white... [a process of] laughing at ourselves and at others and then letting it go.”<sup>56</sup>

The word “boong” was, and still is, an offensive word for Indigenous people, a term of derogation when it is used in mainstream Australia.<sup>57</sup> The Indigenous actors in *Basically Black* subversively ‘reclaim’ this offensive word by using it mockingly. Such humour, with its self-styled superiority and indifference to historically racist images and language, deliberately attempts to shock audiences. As academic Roberta Sykes notes, Indigenous Australian people should “get in first” and call themselves racist, derogatory names such as “bastard” or “nigger.” Then, Sykes notes, there would be nothing left for non-Indigenous Australians to taunt Indigenous persons with.<sup>58</sup> Such humour can be considered a form of ‘black’ (more recently known as “blak”) humour. “Blak” is a term first coined by Indigenous photographic artist Destiny Deacon in 1991, and used in the title of her art exhibition *Walk and Don't Look Blak*.<sup>59</sup> Deacon contends that this word takes the “c” out of the offensive phrase “bloody black cunts.”<sup>60</sup> Additionally, “blak” continues Indigenous Australian artists’s use of phonetic wordplay for a word that has a long history of racist intent in many western countries.<sup>61</sup> Blak humour is a form of comedy tinged with morbidity, often lacking in ‘taste’, and almost always crossing the virtual line that determines what is and what is not socially appropriate. Patrick O’Neill argues that the term is used “to mean humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these.”<sup>62</sup> A frequently discernible element in Indigenous Australian comedy, this form of edgy humour is adopted to shock and lighten the social stigma attached to various taboo or unpalatable topics. The white masks worn by black actors in the *Basically Black* skit are a visual, mocking parody of the tradition of non-Indigenous Australian actors



“blackening-up” with make-up to play “authentic” Indigenous roles in post-colonial Australia.<sup>63</sup> This latter practice, known as “blackface,” had occurred in Australian mainstream theatre from early colonial times. For example, in the 1834 Euro-Australian melodrama *Bushrangers*, English writer and producer Henry Melville created an Indigenous black chief character, Murrahwa, who was played by a white man made up in blackface.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, the white masks from *Basically Black* serve as a protest against mainstream society’s dismissal of Indigenous participation and their inability to portray themselves in post-colonial performance, forming symbols of Indigenous presence, indicating the extent to which Indigenous Australians were active members of Australian society.

Another skit from the pilot of *Basically Black* introduced Indigenous Australian superhero “Super Boong,” aka “Lionel Mouse.” A character who resembles the superman/Clark Kent persona, and played by actor Zac Martin, Super Boong is a parody of popular Indigenous world champion boxer, Lionel Rose. Superheroes have always been identifiable stereotypes in western cultures, exhibiting greater physical, intellectual, and moral attributes than mere “ordinary” human beings. Rob Lendrum notes that early mainstream popular comics (1930s–1950s) did not include people of colour.<sup>65</sup> And there were certainly no Indigenous Australian superheroes produced in mainstream Australian society in the early 1970s.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, Super Boong’s typecast image of moral ‘righteousness’ and ‘goodness’ made a clear point about the exclusion of Indigenous people from popular Australian mythology. Furthermore, Bergson observes that the art of caricature plays on exaggerations, such as superhero characteristics, in order to highlight a comic element.<sup>67</sup> An extract from the pilot skit presents a humorous play on the familiar Superman idiom:

Is it a bat? Is it a crow? Is it the flying doctor? No! It’s Super Boong! Strange visitor from a northern tribe, who came to the city possessing powers far beyond those of mortal praise. Faster than a killer boomerang, and able to leap over tall gum trees... Super Boong uses his secret identity as mild-man-

nered Indigenous Australian ex-boxing champion Lionel Mouse to fight a never-ending battle against racism wherever it may be found!<sup>68</sup>

In one skit, Lionel Mouse hears a cry for help (the result of a racist attack) and the distant dinging of boxing bells (another reference to boxer Lionel Rose). He dashes into a local pub to change into his superhero identity. However, within a short time, Lionel Mouse is back out, still wearing his regular clothing. When he is asked why he has not transformed into his superhero identity, Mouse notes ironically that Indigenous people are restricted from entering the pub. The satirical humour of this skit subversively points to the injustice of the discriminatory laws imposed on Indigenous Australians until the late 1960s, such as the prohibitions placed on the supply of alcohol to them.<sup>69</sup> The existence of such hypocritical injustices were only very infrequently acknowledged by non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>70</sup>

More than simply a means of reclaiming the offensive ‘boong’ label, Super Boong also represents the physical appearance of an Indigenous character in a heroic pursuit of justice, providing a positive symbol and role model for Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike. Once again, such techniques are specific attempts to assist non-Indigenous audiences to face issues of hypocrisy in Australia with humour. *Basically Black’s* Indigenous actors believed that entertainment was a great teaching medium.<sup>71</sup> Bob Maza has said that they did not want to shock non-Indigenous audiences, dissuading them from attending their performances. Rather, difficult messages to communicate to the mainstream about the plight of Indigenous people were best conveyed, Maza felt, with humour rather than with sadness, anger, or moral condemnation.<sup>72</sup> Humour theorists Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering similarly contend that humour encourages audiences to think about issues in a more creative manner than by using more sombre emotional techniques.<sup>73</sup> They suggest that humour can “bring out the viewpoints of... marginalised groups, and cut through pomposity, lies, deceit and doublespeak.”<sup>74</sup>

Freud notes the benefits of deploying such “rebellious” forms of humour, especially by those beleaguered peoples who do not hold positions of social power.<sup>75</sup> According to Freud, humour is not resigned, but rebellious.<sup>76</sup> Feelings of anger, indignation, and injustice against those in social authority can remain significant psychological “obstacles” for oppressed people, but humour is well-suited to attacking the socially esteemed and powerful.<sup>77</sup> Minority people, such as Indigenous Australians, are able to replace socially unacceptable behaviours with tendentious jokes and humour in environments where other forms of violence are disdained and forbidden by law.<sup>78</sup> In this context, humour represents a form of rebellion against authority and the expression of an inner freedom from the oppression it imposes.<sup>79</sup> The style of comedy achieved through Super Boong’s character provided pleasure to Indigenous Australian actors and Indigenous audience members. Indigenous actor Gary Foley says of this performance:

... the best part for us blackfellas from NBT was that the humour itself was subversively political in terms of presenting a direct challenge to prevailing racial attitudes, and we were not only able to get away with saying things to whitefellas that might have got us shot in other places at the time, but we also managed to get people to seriously think about the issues.<sup>80</sup>

Humour gave Indigenous people an outlet to vent pent-up frustrations within a post-colonial socio-political system that had already disadvantaged their communities on so many levels. Allowing them to express issues of cultural loss and grief in mainstream public, humour became a vehicle to communicate these issues where other forms of political protest, expressed in a serious or dramatic fashion, may have angered audience members. Humour’s ability to shock in a ‘non-bona fide’ frame allowed Indigenous Australians to innovatively and originally express a range of issues that non-Indigenous Australians had long ignored or neglected.<sup>81</sup>

The greater access to government funding and support for the Arts that Indigenous artists enjoyed in the 1970s also saw a National Arts Seminar held for the first time in 1973. This seminar provided

clear directions for the development of Indigenous Australian Arts on a national basis.<sup>82</sup> Black theatre companies were proposed for each state, and this led to both the establishment of Brisbane Black Theatre and the “Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre” in Redfern, Sydney, in 1974.<sup>83</sup> In addition to providing performance space, the centre ran acting programs for Indigenous theatre students.<sup>84</sup> Access to regular, professional training and performance assisted Indigenous artists to gain the acting skills and experience required for their admission into mainstream theatre environments, which offered larger audiences and greater opportunities for social kudos. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written about the existence of “symbolic” systems in society, and the way in which they work to provide such esteem and acceptance.<sup>85</sup> These systems nurture forms of “cultural capital,” a form of social wealth more subtle and sometimes less volatile than that represented by monetary or material value. The value and nature of cultural capital is contingent on the knowledge, skills, and behaviours of dominant groups in society.<sup>86</sup> Politically established institutions, management bodies, and education qualifications are universally acknowledged as “guaranteed” cultural capital sources, giving their members and recipients the right to share in mainstream society’s “profits of recognition.”<sup>87</sup> From the early 1970s and onwards, in addition to better training in the dramatic arts, greater access to mainstream financial assistance and support from established non-Indigenous theatre companies helped generate better exposure for Indigenous Australian artists, who increasingly began to appear before mainstream (white) Australian audiences.

Indigenous performance expert, Dr Maryrose Casey, has noted that the 1970s were a ‘transition period’ for individual Indigenous actors who formed collective enterprises in order to gain at least some production control in Australian theatre work.<sup>88</sup> Indigenous playwright Kevin Gilbert wrote at this time:

In my view, Black Theatre should be aiming, for the time being, at social comment. Give onstage blacks’ views of the white society—the hard truth

about its history, values. But we also have to attack apathy and laziness in our black society as well.<sup>89</sup>

In the context of such specific aims, it was not until later, in the 1980s and 1990s, that Indigenous drama departed from the production of collaborative theatre whose role was to address “community concerns,” and began to represent trained performers who achieved greater mainstream attention.<sup>90</sup>

## Humour in Indigenous Australian Theatre of the late 1980s

Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo contend that, although Indigenous people had so little to celebrate themselves, the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations of British colonisation proved an impetus for Indigenous theatre, leading a broader array of Australians to pay more attention to the form.<sup>91</sup> This increased consciousness was, they suggest, partly the result of increased media awareness about the impact of colonisation on Indigenous people, itself partly an outcome of the First National Black Playwrights’ Conference and Workshop<sup>92</sup> held at Australian National University, Canberra, in 1987.<sup>93</sup> A number of new playscripts were workshopped at what became an annual conference, including Jimmy Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae*, which was workshopped at Macquarie University, Sydney, in 1989.

*Bran Nue Dae* is credited as the first Indigenous Australian musical of note in the tradition of modern western musicals.<sup>94</sup> It is an energetic blend of rock opera, song, and dance, all mixed in with liberal doses of humour and romance.<sup>95</sup> Serious issues of importance to Indigenous people, such as land rights, sovereignty, and the accuracy of historical injustices are all covered, although that are handled in a manner that is unique, memorable, and often uplifting. Writer Jimmy Chi, an Asian-Indigenous man from Broome in Western Australia, along with the band, *Kuckles*, composed the songs that Chi later turned into a musical.<sup>96</sup> The play was first performed by the

non-Indigenous *West Australian Theatre Company* for the Festival of Perth in 1990, but included a predominantly Indigenous Australian cast.<sup>97</sup> The play's script reveals that *Bran Nue Dae* is full of comic—often slapstick—dancing and catchy, satirical songs with cheeky lyrics.<sup>98</sup> The upbeat dancing and singing about issues ordinarily considered serious and even negative provide a powerful physical incongruity that is both surprising and vivid. In addition, the script contains many Aboriginal-English phrases which assert the validity of this vocabulary.<sup>99</sup> Theatre critic Katherine Brisbane notes that the play is as far-fetched and “silly” as that of any European grand opera.<sup>100</sup> Focusing on the 1960s journey of Indigenous Australian teenager Willie, the narrative details Willie's travel from a church-run school (an Indigenous boys hostel) in Perth as he returns to his home in Broome. Willie's journey is both physical and psychological as he discovers his heritage, his family, and love along the way. After helping himself to a few illicit Cherry Ripes and a Coke, Willie is expelled by Father Benedictus (or, as the boys say, “Faada”), who castigates Willie in stereotypically harsh German tones: “You vill never change: You are zer leedle Hitler! You are leading der boys astray.”<sup>101</sup> In defiant response, Willie dances and sings, bursting forth with one of the musical's funniest, catchiest songs:

There's nothing I would rather be  
 Than to be an Aborigine  
 And watch you take my precious land away.  
 For nothing gives me greater joy than to  
 Watch you fill each girl and boy  
 With superficial existential shit.

Now you may think I'm cheeky  
 But I'd be satisfied  
 To rebuild your convict ships  
 And sail you on the tide.<sup>102</sup>

In sardonic rhyme, this song challenges mainstream assimilation policies and non-Indigenous claims to sovereign rule of Australia. It also voices what is often an unspoken Indigenous desire for non-In-

digenous people to return to the place from which they came. After running away from school, Willie meets eccentric old Uncle Tadpole, who is coincidentally also from Broome. Tadpole wishes to return to his Country before he dies, as the hard life of droving and drinking that he took up after losing his wife to another man draws to an end.<sup>103</sup> On their journey back to Broome, Willie and Tadpole meet up with hippie German tourist “Slippery” (Wolfgang) and his Australian girlfriend, “Marijuana Annie”—two characters who typify the free-spirited, liberal ideals of young non-Indigenous backpackers. After a staged “accident” in which this naïve couple is led to believe that they have run over Tadpole in their van, they agree to take him and Willie all the way to Broome. This cheekily references the familiar Australian stereotype of a cunning Indigenous Australian person, this incident reappropriates a trope often used by non-Indigenous Australians as justification for punitive treatment of Indigenous peoples. Following a stint in jail, the gang makes it to Broome, where a series of revelations and reunions occur. In a delightfully funny, ironic and particularly “Indigenous” manner, we find out that, in the end, not only are most of the main cast members Indigenous Australians, but a number of them are actually related to one another: Tadpole is Willie’s mother’s long lost husband and his father, “Slippery” is Willie’s half-brother and Father Benedictus’ son, and even Marijuana Annie is a “stolen generations” Indigenous Australian, allowing the idea of a genuine reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to take on a very potent, personal, but hilarious tone. To top off the climax in which these farcical and happy reunions occur, the unrequited love between Willie and Rosie is also finally consummated in these scenes.

Filled with Aboriginal-English phrases, such as “What they bin doing to you my boy, they bin hit you!”<sup>104</sup> the script’s dialogue generates a comical yet authentic representation of Indigenous Australians in its parody of phonetic dialect. References to alcoholism,

Indigenous forays with the penal system, and even dealings with social security are all mocked in the play, confirming Holt's argument that humour may be used to represent difficult truths that are hard to accept:

Humour is a brilliant vehicle for conveying those unpalatable truths that we all would prefer not to confront... [because its]... power is that it is invariably invested with a sting of truth.<sup>105</sup>

Again, the Indigenous tradition of taking the mickey out of social authority and "serious" issues is noteworthy. Such mickey-taking liberties can be seen to have firstly arisen in Indigenous theatre in the 1970s *Basically Black* pilot skit, which includes Bob Maza's characterisation of a pretentious "white" film producer.<sup>106</sup> Taking the mickey can also be seen in the early colonial Australian records of First Officer William Tench who recorded Indigenous Australians mocking and mimicking British pomposity and awkwardness in the Australian Bush.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, catchy, funny songs are frequently repeated and sung in moody styles that match their respective scenes. For example, the song "Is U Mah Baby" is sung at one stage as a romantic love song, another as a mother's plea to find her child, and again, in German, when Father Benedictus and his son Wolfgang are reunited.

Such repetition reminds us of Bergson's suggestion that humour is found in habitual and simple contrivances.<sup>108</sup> Bergson observes how the light comedy of the early twentieth century often employed repetitious methods, which led characters to reproduce a series of incidents, or to re-experience a series of similar accidents in increasingly varied circumstances.<sup>109</sup> We delight in such familiarity and "coincidences," and especially in those that also include a twist or a surprise.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, frequent references to sex are scattered throughout the script. Christian symbolism and Latin idiom are mockingly teased, for example, incongruously likened to a well-known brand of Australian soap:



- BENEDICTUS    Ve are all angels und devils  
                           Creatures of darkness and bodies of light...  
                           Lux in Tenebris!
- TADPOLE        What that, toilet soap?<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, Father Benedictus' use of the Latin phrase "Lux in Tenebris" also operates as a clever allusion to the farcical comedy of the same name, written by German playwright Bertolt Brecht in the early 1900s.<sup>112</sup> According to Herbert Knust and Leonie Marx, Brecht's play mocks the biblical symbolism of darkness and light that distinguished sinful from non-sinful acts, providing an ironic critique of (western) social corruption.<sup>113</sup> *Bran Nue Dae* also shamelessly mocks the use, primarily in western religious and legal arenas, of Latin, a long-dead language. But such mockery is also a form of the characteristically belittling humour of Australians that, similar to mick-ey-taking, is colloquially known as "cutting down the tall poppy" or as "tall poppy syndrome."<sup>114</sup> This playfully denigrating humour implies that traditions such as the use of Latin are implicitly ostentatious. Milner-Davis argues that such typically Australian styles of humour help to ensure that people do not impute to themselves any unwarranted airs or graces.<sup>115</sup> "Big-noting" and modes of pretentious self-regard are often ripe subjects for ridicule in Indigenous Australian comedy, indicating the form's familiarity with the well-known Australian egalitarian ideology of a "fair go" for everyone.

The title of the play itself, *Bran Nue Dae*, is made up of colloquial, phonetic words with multiple references—both to colonial attempts to impose a 'new reality' on First Australians, and the hope that, in the end, we can all believe that a "nue dae" in which reconciliation may be achieved. The reality of humour as a process through which self-actualisation and resilience may be achieved during life's journey is reinforced in this unique and uplifting farce. Although upbeat and funny, the play also pokes fun at the authority of colonisation and challenges governmental assimilation policies. In the end, *Bran Nue Dae* constitutes a celebration of Indigenous

Australian cultural survival and identity. And even though plays such as this were instrumental in allowing Indigenous theatre to achieve a greater mainstream presence and wider audiences, the independent Indigenous theatre companies of the 1980s that produced them ultimately closed.<sup>116</sup> However, these companies helped lay the foundations for the establishment of the Indigenous drama companies that were to arise in the 1990s, many of which remain viable entities today.<sup>117</sup> These newly formed companies effectively transferred creative control of theatre productions to Indigenous Australian artists.<sup>118</sup>

## Independent Directions for Indigenous Australian Theatre

During the 1990s, many Indigenous Australian artists emphasised their pride and the validity of unique Indigenous cultural practices. Humour is one of the essential tools used to help achieve this aim. In Australia's socio-political climate of the 1990s, many publically esteemed Australians challenged the validity of Australia's post-colonial history and its representation of the treatment of Indigenous peoples.<sup>119</sup> Ushering in the "history wars," these challenges were exacerbated by the 1997 International Human Rights Commission Inquiry and subsequent report (1998) into practices of removing Aboriginal children from their families.<sup>120</sup> The need for Indigenous people to tell a wider Australian (and world) audience about their experiences of living in post-colonial Australia became vitally important in light of the contentious socio-political climate of this period. Indigenous Australians often used artistic means to refute and speak back to the denialist perspective of Australia's Indigenous history, as well as to humanise the face of their struggles.

Under the artistic direction of Wesley Enoch, a Minjerribah man from Stradbroke Island,<sup>121</sup> the Brisbane-based Indigenous theatre company *Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts* staged

*The Seven Stages of Grieving* in 1995, a play that toured nationally in 1996.<sup>122</sup> Following its successful Australian tour, the play went to London and Zürich in 1997.<sup>123</sup> The script is a one-woman performance by Deborah Mailman, written by Enoch and Mailman herself. Mailman is an actress of Indigenous Australian (Bidjara) and New Zealand Maori descent. Both she and co-author Enoch graduated from Queensland University of Technology with Bachelor Degrees in Performing Arts in 1993.<sup>124</sup>

The play's title and themes borrow from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's seminal 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, which proposes the five psychological stages of grief experienced by the terminally ill in their journey towards death.<sup>125</sup> But Kübler-Ross's formulation is now reconfigured so as to express the seven phases of Indigenous Australian history: namely, Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-Determination, and Reconciliation.<sup>126</sup> The play takes audiences on an emotional journey through an Indigenous Australian "everywoman's" grief in the face of the deaths of her family members, mirroring the historical "death" and "grief" experienced by Indigenous communities more broadly. Despite her hardships, it is nonetheless with joy that the woman reflects on her life and hard experiences, acknowledging Indigenous peoples' propensity to "cry, laugh, and tell their stories together."<sup>127</sup> This positivity sets the scene for the use of humour by Indigenous Australians as a self-creating and empowering life attitude. As Indigenous author Gayle Kennedy observes of much Indigenous humour, "[I]f you didn't laugh, you'd bloody well have to cry."<sup>128</sup> The dialogue is presented as a traditional yarn, involving many elements of the storytelling genre, including allegorical metaphors.<sup>129</sup> This manner of conveying information to audiences is inclusive, forming a relatively unthreatening tool through which Indigenous performers may canvas their perspective on justice and injustice to audiences without the appearance of moral condemnation. Tragic issues are frequently doused in ironic humour, providing a poignant sense of paradox and incongruity. Mockery and

superiority are used in humorous teasing about English colonisation, providing a form of release for Indigenous people from a range of social injustices. Self-deprecating humour indicates the ongoing racism that is faced by Indigenous Australians in this country.

Freud suggests that to understand the complete ambit of pleasure that self-directed humour can provide, we must first understand what it does to the listener—or, in this case, the audience.<sup>130</sup> Freud claims that listeners might expect tellers (here Indigenous performers) to show signs of affect from their experience of certain injustices: they may be expected to get angry, complain, or otherwise express despair.<sup>131</sup> However, Freud notes that by using humour instead, such expectations are disappointed.<sup>132</sup> Rather than express negative or judgmental emotions, Indigenous performers make jokes. As Freud claims, “There is no doubt that the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest.”<sup>133</sup> The surprising and incongruous operations of humour enables audiences to process unpalatable issues without experiencing excessive guilt or defensiveness. On experiencing such an unusual response, suggests Freud the listener or audiences is given permission to follow suit and to experience a more relaxed form of pleasure in the performance.<sup>134</sup> Humour here represents a metaphorical olive branch, warranting a respectable mediation between Indigenous performers and their audiences. A humorous example from *The Seven Stages of Grieving* in relation to the first arrival of the European colonists demonstrates the effect:

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Oi. Hey, you! Don't you be waving back at me! Yeh, you with that hat! You can't park here, eh! You're taking up the whole bloody harbour! Just get in your boat and go. Go on, go on get!<sup>135</sup>

Audiences are invited to laugh at this sassy vocabulary, which appears familiar and quotidian to their ears, echoing the directions

of a parking inspector. But this joke also underscores the contentious issue of colonisation (or invasion), which had been exacerbated by the “history wars” of the 1990s. While the parodic presentation of the issue is humorous, the exchange also goes to the heart of continuing Indigenous land rights and sovereignty debates. On the question of identity, audiences of *The Seven Stages of Grieving* can laugh at a matter that has been the ongoing cause of shame and embarrassment for many Indigenous Australian people: the colour of their skin. As Mailman’s character asks at one point,

Have you ever been black? You know when you wake up one morning and you’re black? Happened to me this morning. I was in the bathroom, looking in the mirror, “Hey, nice hair, beautiful black skin, white shiny teeth ... I’m BLACK!”<sup>136</sup>

With irony, Mailman’s persona suggests that many Indigenous Australian people have felt the need to deny and hide their Indigenous heritage in order to avoid discrimination and racism. Referencing a well-known, and arguably overused, term in contemporary Australian political context—“reconciliation”—*The Seven Stages of Grieving* features Mailman’s character’s recital of a poem of that selfsame name:

The boats are ready for departure, if you don’t want to stay.  
A Wreck on arrival,  
A changing flag,  
A Con,  
A Silly pride for sale,  
My Nation knows my identity,  
A sun,  
A land,  
A people, travelling.  
What a mess.<sup>137</sup>

As the poem is read, such punning and phonetic words as “Wreck,” “Con,” “Silly,” and “Nation” are also projected onto a large screen. As a term that is easily recognised by Australian audiences, “reconciliation” reminds those familiar with the reconciliation debate

of recent Federal Government attempts to evoke national harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>138</sup> This word-play sarcastically exploits the deployment of “reconciliation” in current government marketing and policymaking documents, making it an emblem among references to a series of terms used by governmental attempts to deal with the post-colonial breakdown of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The purpose of such humour is, as John Morreall notes of much political humour, to undermine and subvert such governmental propaganda.<sup>139</sup> By and large, the play suggests that in the face of overwhelming post-colonial sadness and grief, Indigenous people are still able to laugh and survive the injustice of living in a largely bigoted country.<sup>140</sup> Humour is, as Freud explains, a triumph of narcissism, which enables the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. *The Seven Stages of Grieving* demonstrates how Indigenous egos refuse to be distressed by the provocations of reality, expressing the resistance of all and any temptation to wallow in suffering.<sup>141</sup>

*The Seven Stages of Grieving* was originally produced for one of Australia’s most significant artistic events, *The Festival of Dreaming*.<sup>142</sup> In the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Australia staged various cultural events, including a series of annual festivals that were held all over the country from 1997 until 2000.<sup>143</sup> Directed by Bundjalung woman Rhoda Roberts,<sup>144</sup> Sydney’s Olympic Arts Festival series included *The Festival of Dreaming* as a celebration of world Indigenous peoples.<sup>145</sup> Staged in September–October of 1997, it encompassed traditional visual arts, dancing, singing, and storytelling from seven hundred world Indigenous artists, including the biggest display of Indigenous Australian performing arts ever showcased.<sup>146</sup> It also incorporated the pivotal *Wimmin’s Business* series of plays, which comprised seven monodramas about Indigenous Australian, Maori, and Native American women’s lives.<sup>147</sup> The festival’s Indigenous Australian plays, like much work by Indigenous artists of the time, focused on the telling of personal narratives to main-

stream audiences. This tactic of personalising Indigenous narratives continues to evoke a level of accountability from audiences as they are brought face-to-face with a 'real,' living, breathing Indigenous Australian: a person who has faced the hardship of bigotry and suffering in their life. Although these works are often morally challenging, humour is a very significant element in them, allowing the performer to soften the harsh reality of their character's (and often also the actor's) lived experience.

Another successful Indigenous play from this series, *Box the Pony*, was written by Indigenous writer and actress Leah Purcell and non-Indigenous playwright Scott Rankin.<sup>148</sup> Playing at the Sydney Opera House in September 1997, *Box the Pony* is a semi-biographical representation of Purcell's life, a narrative in which, after growing up in Murgon Queensland, she "escapes" to Sydney as a young adult.<sup>149</sup> Purcell plays all seventeen characters, including the main protagonist, Steff, her mother, Flo, Nanna Daisy, a range of nameless male characters, herself, and even a cow, delivering her story in a feisty, animated, stand-up comedic style.<sup>150</sup> Purcell narrates the story and speaks the dialogue as the narrative jumps from past to present in a format that keeps audiences "on its toes," covering such difficult issues as racism, alcoholism, poverty, ill health, and violence. These serious themes are veiled or softened, however, with a sharp and subversive wit that helps Purcell to face them without sentimentality and with much humour. Describing herself as "a bit of a joker," Purcell uses humour as an important element in her work.<sup>151</sup> As Purcell explains, humour was integral to *Box the Pony's* appeal, inviting audience's to identify with Indigenous issues through generating in them unusual responses.<sup>152</sup> As Purcell reflected on the play: "[i]t was jokes, more jokes... and then next minute you're down into this big issue... And then the audience thinks, well if they're laughing about this stuff, then I can join them."<sup>153</sup>

In fact, Bergson has written that in order to produce comedy, a person must undergo a temporary numbing, or an "anesthesia of

the heart.<sup>154</sup> Expressing sadness or anger at the injustices of post-colonial Indigenous experiences could evoke in audiences feelings such as guilt, anger and rejection. These negative emotions could effectively prevent mainstream audiences from comprehending alternative Indigenous perspectives of Australia's history, and stop them hearing about the experiences of life for Indigenous Australians in this country. The comic pursuit, Bergson suggests, is actually an intellectual, and not an emotional, enterprise.<sup>155</sup> Indigenous performers, such as Purcell, specifically put aside their sadness or anger in order to elicit a less threatening and a more humorous response in their audiences about Indigenous affairs. Indigenous artists such as Purcell appreciate that mainstream audiences are infinitely more receptive to their perspective when it is presented in a humorous yarn rather than in condemnatory terms. Purcell concedes that from an early age, she knew that she could tell a great yarn.<sup>156</sup> In the play, she addresses the audience directly, setting up lines of intimate communication that enable her to employ this traditional Indigenous mode of narratorial address. Stylistically, this technique is warm and personable, yet it also remains morally challenging. Purcell's humorous storytelling becomes a way in which she convinces non-Indigenous audiences to explore the possibilities of their moral culpability in supporting or passively endorsing the same social systems that have caused such severe trauma in so many Indigenous lives. Her story, in a sense, functions like one of the stages from *The Seven Stages of Grieving*, veiling and guising an uncomfortable or confronting issues in a personal and intimate façade that is both comical and cutting.

Humour is, as Freud suggests, a doubled-edged sword, hiding and concealing its disparagement as it also expresses something whose articulation is socially "forbidden."<sup>157</sup> In this way, Indigenous humour is similarly a tool that attempts to challenge and transform established structures of power in mainstream in a subversive manner yet effective political manner.



Comedy is introduced to the audience right from the beginning of *Box the Pony*. Playing ten-year-old Steff, Purcell is cajoled into singing and dancing as the 1980s song “Kung Fu Fighting” plays in the background. Steff performs in a style that both takes the mickey out of the song itself, as well as satirises her own character’s childish persona. Suddenly, however, reverting to childlike embarrassment, Steff goes all “myall”: shy and reticent. Then switching back to her adult self, Steff announces the following lines in a self-deprecating tone:

Gunnar gunnar, eh... like my mum said, you can take the girl out the mission, but you can't take the mission out of this myall little black gin for up'ome'der!<sup>158</sup>

The play uses much traditional language, Aboriginal English, and even mainstream Australian slang to situate it as a humorous Australian, and specifically Murri, story. People can be “solid,” “deadly,” or even excellent “like John Wayne” (apparently a folk hero in Murgon). Girls can also find themselves “poxed up” (pregnant), or “charged up” (drunk). A good friend is a “cuss” (cousin) and a white person a “gubba” who is perhaps about to step in dog “gunung” (animal dung or droppings). The meaning of these words is readily grasped within the context of the sentences, yet such colloquial vernacular heightens the humour and accessibility of the text, enhancing Steff’s (Purcell’s) mode of intimately yarning with the audience in what is a constant interaction: at times, Steff looks at the audience for a fight, at others, she warmly addresses them as “cuss,” and at other times again she invites them into an Indigenous Australian kinship relationship, asking them about their heritage (“Are you Murri, Koori, Nunga?”).

Boxing is a theme that is woven into the text of *Box the Pony* and represented as a form of defensive bravado, suggesting Steff’s defiance by indicating that no situation can “box” her (the pony) into a corner or dent her resilience. Purcell’s character talks about the long line of boxing heroes in her family, bemoaning the prevalence

of sexism in an incongruous and ironic line: “The boys got all the deadly things: the trophies, the Golden Gloves... the brain damage.”<sup>159</sup>

Throughout the play, boxing is a multi-faceted thematic: it is at once a prized possession, a triumphant show of strength, a bitter cruelty, and a “necessary” tool of survival in a racist world. And yet the boxing metaphor is also tempered with humour, enabling Steff to rationalise the presence of physical aggression in her young life and in the lives of so many Indigenous Australians. At the same time, boxing also symbolises the innermost desires and struggles that Steff has faced—and will continue to face—in her life. Her feisty vigour and funny moves (hitting a large boxing bag, dancing and miming), contrast sharply with her experience of times of emotional rejection, trauma, and sadness. The expression, through boxing and physical activity, of her physical energies and vulnerabilities only enhance the emotional roller-coaster that the play presents as Steff’s life. Drama and humour work hand-in-hand, disarming audiences, yet also keeping them attentive and receptive to those issues that are important to Purcell’s character.

Festival Director Robyn Archer has described *Boxing The Pony* as a play that is, in many ways, a story about losers. However, because the narrative is related to the audience with such feisty humour and delightful vitality, it becomes, in effect, an affirmation of life.<sup>160</sup> Steff’s ability to laugh triumphantly in the face of violence, poverty, and racism, provides an effective device for raising these issues with audiences who, while not ordinarily disposed to thinking about their own attitudes, may now be able to laugh at themselves and their prejudices vicariously through Purcell’s characters. Through the persona of Steff, Purcell shows that she has consistently overcome her difficulties by laughing at them. As Freud notes, humour is not a sign of resignation, but of defiance, signifying a person’s ability to assert themselves in an unjust world.<sup>161</sup> Following its state performances, *Box the Pony* went on to play theatres around Australia, and then overseas: in Edinburgh, Scotland, at London’s

Barbican Theatre, and finally to Broadway in New York.<sup>162</sup> Purcell was awarded the Premier's Literary Award in New South Wales and Queensland both for the playscript and her acting.<sup>163</sup> The script has since been included as an audition monologue in Australia's premier drama school, NIDA.<sup>164</sup> In 2004 Purcell was awarded a US "Eisenhower Fellowship" for outstanding leadership, the first Indigenous Australian to receive this prestigious award.<sup>165</sup> These accolades and the staging of this play at such prominent venues can again be seen in terms of Bourdieu's description of the attribution of cultural capital or cultural esteem. However, it would be wrong to suggest that such Indigenous theatrical "success" as Purcell's represents an act of valorisation of, or a kowtowing to, mainstream cultural structures. Rather, this success, which enables Indigenous performers to receive such mainstream public exposure, should be considered among one of the many ways in which Indigenous artists have been able to better persuade and convince mainstream Australians and others to reconsider the existence of Indigenous worldviews, and even to adopt a part of their unique perspective.

Indigenous plays such as *The Seven Stages of Grieving* and *Box the Pony* successfully demonstrate the important contributions that Indigenous Australians make to Australia's cultural industries. In 2000, Indigenous novelist Melissa Lucashenko recognised this success and the lucrative potential of Indigenous Australian cultural capital. Playfully alluding to a popular Australian advertising campaign of the time, Lucashenko wryly ruminates: "What the bloody hell did Australians give their overseas relations before Aboriginal Australia was invented?"<sup>166</sup> Before this, back in 1995, theatre critic Katherine Brisbane emphasised the potential of Indigenous theatre, although she also noted that few of these plays could be considered major works, and that just as few were ready for international showcasing.<sup>167</sup> But since 1995, the proverbial tide has turned. Indigenous Australian artists can now "hold their own" in mainstream discourse, constituting a significant artistic presence in theatre productions both nation-

ally and internationally.<sup>168</sup> Many Indigenous plays from the 1990s and early-2000s have also now been adapted for the screen as successful movies and for television: *Box the Pony* was, in part, filmed and made into a teaching resource for Australian high school students in 1999; *Bran Nue Dae* was made into a mainstream hit movie in 2010; and *The Sapphires*, an Indigenous play from 2004, was also made into a very successful film, forming a further testament to Indigenous performance excellence. In these decades, the stage had been set for Indigenous Australian artists to become leading voices in Australian theatre discourse, and a familiar artistic entity on the world's stage.

This had been predicted in 1989 in the prophetic words of Indigenous political leader, Charles Perkins AO. Perkins observed that a “growing appreciation” for Black Australians was being realised, and that a greater sense of self-confidence, forged in the fires of oppression and activism, had helped to articulate proud and strong contemporary expressions of Aboriginality.<sup>169</sup> Humour is an integral part of this endeavour. And although conclusions about the primary purpose of the use of humour in Indigenous Australian performance are subject to theoretical and literary-critical study and speculation, humour remains an empowering force and life attitude. Indigenous Australians frequently employ humour to surprise and shock mainstream audiences, prompting them to consider matters from their distinct perspectives. Indigenous worldviews are often tied to grief and loss that, with the use of strategies such as humour and incongruity, may provide narratives with elements of uplifting power. Such a strategy of humour suggests that, in the end, despite such overwhelming negativity, survival and hope is possible for Indigenous culture and identity. Humour is, as Freud claims, an empowering force used by long-suffering people. Validating, articulating, and popularising the artistic practices of Indigenous Australians, humour provides a more accessible avenue for social critique. Ultimately, humour provides a unique way of opening up conversations about serious issues that other forms of communication do not.

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## Notes

- 1 Jack Davis, quoted in Keith Chesson, *Jack Davis: A Life-Story* (Ferntree Gully, Victoria: Dent Australia, 1988), 197.
- 2 In 1997 the Human Rights Commission released its report, *Bringing them Home: A Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, accessed March 5, 2014. This report documents the history and personal stories of disadvantage & degradation faced by many Aboriginal people as a direct result of Government Policies and control. Report available <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>.
- 3 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (New York: Dover Publications [1911] 2005), 14-18.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- 5 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Milton Park, Abingdon, 2010), 58.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng'andu, "Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research," *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010), accessed August 26, 2014. Available from [http://www.isrn.qut.edu.au/pdf/ijcis/v3n1\\_2010/Final\\_Bessarab\\_Bridget\\_IJClS.pdf](http://www.isrn.qut.edu.au/pdf/ijcis/v3n1_2010/Final_Bessarab_Bridget_IJClS.pdf).
- 8 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Christine Watson, "Believe Me: Acts of Witnessing in Aboriginal Women's Autobiographical Narratives," in *Journal of Australian Studies* 24, no. 64 (2000): 143.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 12 Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (London, UK: Penguin Group, [1905] 2002).
- 13 *Ibid.* For example, on page 108 Freud writes that the stories and jokes created by Jews that "have grown from the soil of Jewish popular life" are particularly funny because Jewish people understand the nature of their good and bad points so much better than outsiders do. This paper will show that this is also true of much Indigenous Australian humour, which also reveals a propensity for insider Indigenous protagonists to laugh at themselves.
- 14 Australian Federal Government Museum of Australian Democracy, "Documenting a Democracy: Australia's Story," accessed March 5, 2014, <http://foundingdocs.gov.au/amendment-amid-21.html>.
- 15 Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The 1967 Referendum: Race, Power and the Australian Constitution* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 2 and 17.
- 16 Australian Federal Government,

- "Indigenous Australians and the Vote" (Australian Electoral Commission, 14 January 2013), accessed 5 March 2014, <http://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/indigenous-vote.htm>.
- 17 "Australian 1967 Referendum," (Creative Spirits, November 7, 2012, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australian-1967-referendum#toc1>).
- 18 "Documenting a Democracy: Australia's Story."
- 19 On 10 April 1967, Indigenous leader and referendum campaigner Bill Onus was reported as saying: "Australians must vote to give the Aborigine full citizenship rights." Attwood claims that this is how the campaign for the referendum was represented. However, Onus also notes that the campaign was a question of basic human rights and recognition of Indigenous Australians as a race of people and these points were not reported as clearly. See Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), x.
- 20 For example, in 1962, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement published a brochure on the lack of consistency between the five States and the Northern Territory with regards to Indigenous rights. Indigenous Australians did not have the right to vote in WA and QLD; they could not marry freely in WA, QLD, and NT; they could not move around freely in Vic, SA, WA, NT, or QLD; and they could only own property and receive award wages in NSW. See this pamphlet, set out in Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The 1967 Referendum, or When Aborigines Didn't Get the Vote* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997), 13.
- 21 Australian Federal Government Electoral Commission, "History of the Indigenous Vote," accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/history.html>.
- 22 "Australian 1967 Referendum."
- 23 Australian Federal Government National Archives of Australia, "Neville Bonner Facts Sheet 231," accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/factsheets/fs231.aspx>.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Malcolm Farnsworth, "1972 Federal Election," *Australianpolitics.com*, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://australianpolitics.com/voting/elections/1972-federal>.
- 26 Australian Government Prime Ministers Centre, "Prime Facts 21: Edward Gough Whitlam, AC, QC," accessed March 5, 2014, <http://static.moadoph.gov.au/ophgovau/media/images/apmc/docs/21-Whitlam-Web.pdf>.
- 27 Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 95-96.
- 28 Ibid., 96.
- 29 Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature, 1929-1988* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1989), 179-197.
- 30 Kath Walker, *We are Going* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1964).
- 31 Casey, *Creating Frames*, 18-19.
- 32 Attwood and Markus, *The 1967 Referendum*, 30-32.
- 33 Ibid., 341-343.
- 34 Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page*, 111.

- 35 Casey, *Creating Frames*, 23-24.
- 36 Gerry Bostock, "Black Theatre" in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed. Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 67.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 67-70.
- 38 Casey, *Creating Frames*, 52.
- 39 "The National Black Theatre," ABC Message Stick, July 1, 2012, accessed October 19, 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s3538616.htm>.
- 40 Casey, *Creating Frames*, 53.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 43 "Images from Australian Indigenous History: The 1970s Pioneer ABC-TV Production of *Basically Black*," *The Koori History Website*, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1970s/blacktheatre/abctvdx.html>.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *Basically Black*, YouTube, February 5, 2008, accessed March 25, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cSKGGsrWL4> and *Super Boong*, YouTube, November 28, 2013, accessed January 29, 2014, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Skuv\\_DF8nIY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Skuv_DF8nIY).
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.* Also see "The National Black Theatre."
- 48 Jessica Milner Davis, "Aussie Humour and Laughter: Joking as an Acculturating Ritual," in *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, ed. Fran De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2009), 31-47.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 50 Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003), 201-203.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Bergson, *Laughter*, 80.
- 53 Critchley, *On Humour*, 59.
- 54 Bergson, *Laughter*, 19-20.
- 55 Lillian Holt, "Aboriginal Humour: A Conversational Corroboree," in *Serious Frolic*, 83.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 Although the origins of this word are not entirely certain, online sources suggest that it is a derivative of an Eora or Cadigal (NSW) word, "boonga-boonga," which means "bum" or "arse." See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Boong&defid=4114897>.
- 58 Roberta Sykes, "Do caged kookaburras still laugh? Humour in Aboriginal writing," *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humour* 10, no. 2 (1989): 46.
- 59 Daniel Browning, "Editorial," in "Blak on Blak," *Artlink Magazine* 30, no. 1 (2010): 19.
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 An example is the blackface minstrel tradition, in which white people blacken their faces and performing songs and dance in imitation of African-American or Caribbean peoples. This tradition began in the USA, but it also has a history of representation of black people as dimwitted in other western countries, such as the UK and Australia. Eric Lott claims that blackface minstrel shows had their origins in the nineteenth century slave trade and 'the quite explicit "borrowing" of black cultural materials for "white dissemination (and profit)." See Eric Lott "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of

- Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations* 39, no. 1 (1992): 23.
- 62 Patrick O'Neill, "The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour," *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 10, no. 2 (1983): 145.
- 63 Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitics* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 23.
- 64 Meg Tasker, review of *Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage* by Richard Fotheringham, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL)* 6 (2007): 128–131.
- 65 Rob Lendrum, "The Super Black Macho, One Baaad Mutha: Black Superhero Masculinity in 1970s Mainstream Comic Books," *Extrapolation* 46 no. 3 (2005): 365.
- 66 In 1985, Indigenous Australian visual artist Lin Onus created a graphic comic character, "Kaptn Koori" (1985, gouache and ink on illustration board, 67.0 x 44.0 cm) for his son, recognising a lack of positive Indigenous role models in the medium. See Margo Neale, *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948–1996* (Sydney, Australia: Craftsman House, 2000), 64.
- 67 Bergson, *Laughter*, 13.
- 68 "The National Black Theatre."
- 69 Attwood and Markus, *The 1967 Referendum*, 15.
- 70 For example, after a successful meeting held in 1963 between Prime Minister Menzies and an Indigenous delegation for constitutional change, Menzies was surprised to be told that he was breaking the law by offering Kath Walker/Oodgeroo an alcoholic drink. See Attwood and Markus, *The 1967 Referendum*, 32–33.
- 71 Bob Maza, quoted in "Summer Series 10: Bob Maza," *ABC Message Stick*, February 4, 2005, accessed 19 October 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s1276748.htm>.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour and Comedy," in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, eds. Sharon Lockyer & Michael Pickering (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2009), 20.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 98.
- 76 Sigmund Freud, "Humour," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. xxi (1927–31) (Toronto, Canada: Clark, Irwin & Co., [1927] 1964), 163.
- 77 Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 100 and 102.
- 78 Ibid., 100.
- 79 Ibid., 101–2; and Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications 2005), 164.
- 80 Gary Foley, "The Contrarian: Black Power, Black Theatre and Black Humour' in *Tracker Magazine*, October 5, 2012, accessed October 16, 2012, <http://www.tracker.org.au/2012/10/the-contrarian-black-power-black-theatre-and-black-humour/>.
- 81 Lockyer and Pickering, "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour and Comedy," 20.
- 82 Casey, *Creating Frames*, 96.
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- 94 Paul Bidy, "Introduction," in *Bran Nue Dae: A Musical Journey*, eds. Jimmy Chi and Kuckles (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), viii.
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- 98 *Ibid.*
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- 101 Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae*, 15.
- 102 *Ibid.*
- 103 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 104 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 105 Holt, "Aboriginal Humour: A Conversational Corroboree," 86.
- 106 *Basically Black*, YouTube.
- 107 Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 201-203.
- 108 Bergson, *Laughter*, 38.
- 109 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 110 *Ibid.*, 44-45.
- 111 Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae*, 84.
- 112 Herbert Knust and Leonie Marx, "Brechts *Lux in Tenebris*," *Monatshefte* 65, no. 2 (1973): 117-125:
- 113 Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae*, 84.
- 114 "Tall poppy syndrome" refers to the propensity for egalitarian-loving Australians to castigate successful people or issues (to 'cut them down a peg or two') for fear that they might be considered overly elevated or important. This concept was made popular by NSW Premier Jack Lang in his 1934 parliamentary speech when he referred to making some deserving "tall poppies suffer." See "The Premier's Plan: Signing by Mr Lang, admitted by party member," *Canberra Times*, July 19, 1934, accessed May 20, 2014, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/2364407>.
- 115 Milner Davis, "Aussie Humour and Laughter: Joking as an Acculturating Ritual," 39.
- 116 Casey, 195.
- 117 *Ibid.* The *Ilbjerri Theatre Company* was established in 1990; the *Yirra Yaakin*

- Noongar Theatre Company* established in 1993, and *The Kooemba J'darra Indigenous Performing Arts Company* also established in 1993.
- 118 Casey, *Creating Frames*, 195.
- 119 Termed the "culture wars" or "history wars," these challenges stemmed from an article that historian Dr Geoffrey Blainey wrote in *Quadrant Magazine* in 1993 (vol. 37, nos. 7/8) in which he suggested that Australians had taken on a 'black arm-band' view of history, and that in fact Indigenous people had not been treated as poorly in colonial Australia as other historians, such as Manning Clark and Henry Reynolds, had previously suggested. Prime Minister John Howard joined Blaney's bandwagon by supporting these claims in his 1996 Sir Robert Menzie's Speech. In this speech, Howard claimed that "The 'black armband' view of our history reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination [...] I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed." See <http://www.menzieslecture.org/1996.html>, accessed September 4, 2014.
- 120 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, accessed January 13, 2015, [https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social\\_justice/bringing\\_them\\_home\\_report.pdf](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf)
- 121 "Wesley Enoch" (HLA Management, n.d.), accessed March 6, 2014, <http://www.hlamgt.com.au/client/wesley-enoch/>.
- 122 Wesley Enoch and Debora Mailman, "A History of Kooemba Jdarra," in *The Seven Stages of Grieving* (Fortitude Valley: Playlab Press, [1996] 2002), 26-27.
- 123 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 124 "Deborah Mailman: Biography," *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*, n.d., accessed 6 March 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0537648/>; also see [www.australianplays.org](http://www.australianplays.org), n.d.
- 125 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London: Tavistock, [1969] 1970).
- 126 Enoch and Mailman, "A History of Kooemba Jdarra," back cover.
- 127 *Ibid.*
- 128 Gayle Kennedy, "What Makes a Blackfulla Laugh?" *Australian Author* 14, no. 3 (2009): 14.
- 129 Prior to English colonisation, all Indigenous Australian cultures had oral language traditions. These oral traditions incorporated a storytelling genre, frequently labelled "Dreaming stories" by non-Indigenous Australians who have grappled to understand these complex, often lengthy, narratives. Indigenous stories encompassed messages about creation, morality, laws, rights and responsibilities for living in communities and were integral elements of traditional societies. See Larissa Behrendt, "Indigenous Literature: We've Always Been Storytellers," in *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*, (Milton: Wiley Publishing Australia, 2012), 293-4.
- 130 Freud, "Humour," 162.
- 131 *Ibid.*

- 132 Ibid.
- 133 Ibid.
- 134 Ibid.
- 135 Enoch and Mailman, "A History of Kooemba Jdarra," 50.
- 136 Ibid., 52.
- 137 Ibid., 69.
- 138 The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established by the Australian Federal Government in 1991. See <http://pals.daa.wa.gov.au/en/Reconciliation/Reconciliation-Australia/>, accessed September 12, 2014. When this council was disbanded, the Federal Government established the "Reconciliation Australia" organisation in 2001. See <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/>, accessed September 12, 2014.
- 139 John Morreall, "Humour and the Conduct of Politics," in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, 80.
- 140 Enoch and Mailman, "A History of Kooemba Jdarra," 16.
- 141 Freud, "Humour," 162.
- 142 Enoch and Mailman, "A History of Kooemba Jdarra," inside cover.
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- 165 "Leah Purcell." Also see the *Eisenhower Fellowships* website: <http://>

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