

No more lap lap and spear

Suzanne Spinner at the 1999 Indigenous Arts Festival

We Iri We Homeborn, the 1999 Indigenous Arts Festival hosted by the City of Port Phillip, showcased some new work by a range of Aboriginal artists in film, theatre, music and visual arts around St Kilda with the National Theatre as the main venue.

Festival Co-ordinator and Koori Arts Officer Kim Kruger spoke of “giving a focus to South East Australian Indigenous art” to show that “Aboriginal art is not just created in the desert or from the north, but that it has its place here in Melbourne.” Issues of identity were a primary focus, and artists tackled them in many different ways. Koori Aboriginality is fluid, multifaceted, negotiable and often problematic and this was reflected in the works presented.

Glen Shea's debut play *Possession* set up a complicated and strangely dislocated lens to refract the issues of the Stolen Generation and Aboriginal genocide. His family drama had more in common with Tennessee Williams' steamy south than anywhere in Australia. The story revolved around incest and retribution for the sins of the father and it was unclear if the father character's whiteness was any more relevant than the children's Aboriginality. It was primarily a generic ghost story with universal references to the abandonment of children and the rapacity of the adults, and its Gothic horror tended to swamp a more subtle reading of its metaphors.

In contrast, Maryanne Sam's *Casting Doubts*, also a first play, was presented as a reading and tackled the issue head on in a clever and witty way. Set in an Aboriginal casting agency it follows the trials and tribulations of 5 struggling Indigenous actors who are caught between “no more lap lap and spear” and not looking

Aboriginal enough. It uses the minstrel show format with white gloves and lots of sung interludes to punctuate the episodes. It was both very funny and confronting. Producers and directors acknowledge “she's a good little actor but she doesn't look Aboriginal enough” and so, “how will our audience know she's Aboriginal?”. A film director screeches “we can't bloody see him, now he's green we're losing his features, he's just a silhouette.” The search for the New Age Jedda is relentless. Another Aboriginal actor looks right and has a “strong stage presence” but is directed to “lower your eyes, lower your voice, hunch your shoulders, a little less attitude, please.” Sam manages to throw up all the contradictions including the desire of many Aboriginal actors not to be cast only as Aboriginal. *Casting Doubts* deserves further development and should be toured to schools as it raises the core issue of Aboriginality in a way that invites discussion and analysis of the larger inherent issues.

The film program, *Blak Looks*, premiered Ivan Sen's *Wind* and Richard Frankland's *Harry's War*. The latter tells the true story of Frankland's uncle Harry Saunders who enlisted in WW2 and died in Papua New Guinea. Frankland describes it as a story “about mateship that transcends race and colour” and it focuses on Harry Saunders and his Aussie mate who survives him. Harry's glorious expectations of equality when the war is over are punctured by the prescient words of his young wife. David Ngoombujarra as Harry and Peter Docker as his mate give finely felt and detailed performances, but Kylie Belling as Harry's wife is constrained by having to carry the message of the film. *Harry's War* is a clear, well constructed narrative film without any distinctive cinematic embellishment.

Ivan Sen's *Wind* is set last century on the frontier in NSW and examines in extreme close-up the problematic relationship between a young Black Tracker and his policeman boss as they pursue an

Aboriginal murderer. In contrast with Frankland's film, Sen's vision is utterly cinematic, the story told by superb actors including Bradley Byquar and Ralph Cotterill, with virtually no words. It is all in the performances, the barely perceptible registering of looks, as feelings are written on the faces and in the atmospherics of sound and visuals. It is a strong and powerful film in the territory of Kurosawa where the landscape itself is a protagonist.

In discussion with Rachel Perkins after the screening, Sen talked about his desire to be a filmmaker who can tackle any subject whereas Richard Frankland has clearly set himself an Aboriginal agenda with this film and his earlier *No Way to Forget*.

Watching Jimmy Little perform upstairs at The Kulin Chillin Club was another insight into contemporary Aboriginality. Little was, as always, in that fine voice which recalls Roy Orbison and spans more than 40 years—from the days of *Royal Telephone* and the 1959 film *Shadow of the Boomerang* to today when he calls himself proudly a Yorta Yorta man, and records on his new album *Messenger* songs by Paul Kelly, Nick Cave and Neil Finn. In the trajectory of Little's career, you can see many of the dilemmas and contradictions raised in *Casting Doubts*.



Bradley Byquar, Ralph Cotterill in Ivan Sen's *Wind*

In the visual arts, *Oldies but Goodies* at Linden Gallery presented the more established artists. Photographer Destiny Deacon's work stood out, in 3 portraits of Ms Ella Pitt, an Erub Mer and Kuku woman, and former nightclub singer, who is recognised as an Elder in the Melbourne community. What I loved about these images was the wonderful melange of cultures presented. Alongside tortoise shells, Torres Strait carvings and seashell artefacts, Ms Pitt has her other trophies—black dolls, Buddhas, stuffed cobras—and she is resplendent in an ocelot patterned leisure suit. Among the emerging artists at *Dream Girls* (Jackman Gallery), Leann Edwards' paintings of scenes from her family's history were lovingly detailed narratives of life long gone for Aboriginal people. They have the same immediate appeal of Ian Abdullah's work, taking you right into a particular moment in time.

We Iri We Homeborn, St Kilda, July 2 - 25.

Harry's War and *Wind* are touring as part of the AFI's Crossing Tracks program: State Library, Brisbane, October 7 & 9; Mercury Cinema, Adelaide, October 16; Cinema Paradiso, Perth, October 14 - 20; State Cinema, Hobart, October 23.