

massacre sites: actual, theatrical, virtual

suzanne spinner: bindjareb pinjarra



Kelton Pell, Geoff Kelso, Bindjareb Pinjarra

IN THE SOUTH WEST OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA IN 1834, FIVE YEARS AFTER WHITE SETTLEMENT, A GOVERNMENT SURVEY WAS UNDERTAKEN IN THE INTERESTS OF PROTECTING THE LIFE AND PROPERTY OF THE SETTLERS. IT CULMINATED IN A BLOODY BATTLE AT PINJARRA IN WHICH THE 21 NAMED BINDJAREB NYOONGARS WERE KILLED. OF COURSE IT WASN'T A BATTLE ANYMORE THAN IT WAS A SURVEY. IT WAS A MASSACRE AND THE BODIES OF MANY MORE UNNAMED BINDJAREB WERE WASHED DOWN THE MURRAY RIVER; ACCORDING TO INDIGENOUS ACCOUNTS BETWEEN 70 AND 150 MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

One white officer died from falling off his horse. Since then the Pinjarra massacre has been a casualty of the history wars. Back then the Bindjareb were wedged between two landowners: Peel who owned 250,000 acres on the Mandurah side of the river and Meares who had 20,000 acres on the southern side of the Bindjareb. They were squeezed in along the river. This configuration of forces was the basis for the massacre; the Bindjareb had nowhere to go and were mowed down with muskets fired from both banks of the river.

This year is the 175th anniversary of the massacre and it is being remembered with a play, a travelling art exhibition and a website with a podcast which can be downloaded as an audio tour for people who visit the massacre's location. The site is so fiercely contested that the local council still refuses to acknowledge the event or put up signage let alone erect a memorial. So, paradoxically the virtual site, www.pinjaramassacresite.com, is the contemporary historical site.

The podcast was made by the actors who feature in the play, Bindjareb

Pinjarra performed in Fremantle at Deckchair Theatre. This is a revival of the 1994 production. The original performer-creators, Kelton Pell, Geoff Kelso and Phil Thomson, who approached the Pinjarra man Trevor Shorty Parfitt to be the fourth storyteller, have regrouped to honour his memory and pass the show on to three new people, another senior Pinjarra man Frank Nannup and two young fellas—Nyoongar actor Isaac Drandic and Wadjella, Sam Longley. The play must be passed on because it exists as an oral form created from improvisation around the historical records and the oral accounts of the Nyungars and informed by the everyday as well as present day interactions. The ensemble of six male actors are all agile performers and accomplished improvisers and very funny too, because this play about a massacre is presented as a comedy with a black undercurrent. The humour is always deadly serious. The actors play across age, class and race and play they do so that all the stereotypes are well worked over for comic effect. Its great strength is the depth of story it tells and the quality of the tale tellers. Among them, Kelton Pell and Sam Longley stand out in particular for their ability to take us deep inside the other and find the familiar self beyond stereotype.

The staging is pared back and clear, everyone wears the same costume-uniform, there are few props, no sets, just benches to return to between scenes, and, dominating the space, a mural backdrop painted in the Carrolup style by contemporary Nyoongar artist Lance Tjyllyungoo Chadd whose work features in the exhibition at the old Fremantle Gaol along with 20 other artists. The backdrop is a powerful, atmospheric landscape of big old river gums and grasstrees beside a deep gully and a shaded creek depicted at sunset, conjuring a gothic scenario of ghosts, blackboys and a river running with blood and choked with bloated bodies. It presents a disturbing stillness that can never be read as elegiac once you know the history of the place.

Subtly dramatic lighting played on this painting, animating all its moodiness enhanced by the soundscape which incorporated voices, rifle shots, birdsong and the plaintive wail of a didjeridu. The actors contributed the live sound of clapsticks to punctuate the scenes, drive the action forward, keeping us alert and alarmed, unable to forget what happened. If there was any doubt that the play needed to be revived post-Apology, then what happened to Shorty Parfitt's family on opening night when they ordered a taxi which refused to pick them up, shows that even in tourist savvy, sophisticated Fremantle there are still deep pockets of racism. The story still needs telling.

Bindjareb Pinjarra will tour to The Dreaming Festival June 11-14 June, Woodford, www.woodfordfolkfestival.com/thedreaming, and Brisbane Powerhouse, June 15-17

Bindjareb Pinjarra, created and performed by Isaac Drandic, Geoff Kelso, Sam Longley, Franklin Nannup, Kelton Pell & Phil Thomson; Victoria Hall, Fremantle, March 17-April 3