

Windshuttling The Right: Some Australian Literary and Historical Adaptations for the Stage

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For the purposes of this discussion I am going to take liberties with the idea of “adaptation” and extend it beyond the primary meaning of a literary work rewritten for presentation in a different medium, to suggest that we might also consider sources for dramatic adaptation other than the purely literary. I want to extend it to include “cultural narratives,” stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and that ultimately contribute to our sense of belonging to a nation. Many of these narratives are of course expressed in literary form. But there are adaptations of stories that differ according to the tellers, or to the cultural group to which the teller belongs. In Australia the most dramatic disjunction between versions of a national story is that between white and black narratives of shared, post-contact history.

There are various mediums of expression for these stories, and the plays that represent adaptations draw upon several of these sources. They are, in the main, to be found in anthropological accounts of Aboriginal society; in histories, written mainly by academics; and in a series of significant official reports, documents such as Sir Ronald Wilson and Mick Dodson’s *Bringing Them Home*, the report for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and the report of the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody. There are of course countless other documents that are cited in secondary accounts by various historians. These are white narratives; I will return to black ones in due course.

Historical writings have always been important sources for cultural narratives disseminated outside as well as inside the academies, sources indeed of the national mythologies that have helped hold together two hundred years of immigrants into a cohesive entity known as “nation.” The process by which “facts” become “myths,” with an even more tenacious hold on our imagined selves, is not

one I am examining today, or at least not directly. I am interested in the political dimension of the process, however. Australia has at present a Prime Minister who has cunningly captured a section of our current historical discourse and used it for his own political ends. The “history war” between competing versions of our past has its source in Geoffrey Blainey’s insulting phrase “black armband history,” denigrating revisionist historical accounts of hitherto relatively unchallenged versions of white history, versions that heroicized the victors and denigrated the victims.

The timing of this history war is not accidental. On the left are those who have been influenced by postmodern and postcolonial revolutions in methodology and theory: Henry Reynolds, Lyndal Ryan, Raymond Gaita, Robert Manne, to name only a few. On the right are those whose conservative ideology extends to scholarship: Keith Windshuttle, Ron Brunton, P.P. McGuinness, Christopher Pearson. Their arguments have spilled into the public domain via newspapers, notably the *Australian* on the right, *The Age* (mostly) on the left, with many interventions from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Financial Review*, the *Sun Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

Since the nub of the argument is the question of how many Aborigines were deliberately killed on our frontier, and the subsequent genocidal practice of stealing Aboriginal children from their parents, we might ask where we could find Aboriginal versions of events. The conservative historians have trouble with oral narratives, despite the fact that very many of these are now archived in printed form, such as the “Many Voices” collection of oral narratives held in the National Library in Canberra, and of course the 535 Aboriginal witnesses in the *Bringing Them Home* Report, who had experienced separation from their birth families at the hands of white officialdom. Much time and effort was spent by white critics of this report, attempting to undermine its credibility, despite the “culturally transforming” impact of the report, to use Robert Manne’s words, evidenced in the hundreds of thousands of signatures in the Sorry Books, and the huge reconciliation marches (5).

Probably few white Australians, even those who expressed their sorrow, know the real significance of “sorry” to Aborigines. Jane Harrison, writer of the play *Stolen*, explained Aboriginal Sorry Business to me. Child stealing was often justified not only on the grounds of racial eugenics (pre-World War Two), or cultural assimilation (subsequently), or simply with the claim that the children’s lives would be bettered, but also the assumption was often made, (by A. O. Neville, for example), that the black mothers soon forgot their taken children, as they never mentioned them again. In fact that was part of the ritualized Aboriginal method of dealing with grief—the destruction of everything worn or owned by the lost child, and the expunging of their name forever—exactly the ritual enacted upon the actual death of a child. Such cultural misunderstandings clearly

demonstrate the fact that Aboriginal knowledge was subjugated in a hierarchy that privileged text-based knowledge. Conservative historians such as Windshuttle persist in this prejudice. Keiryn Babcock noted in an article exploring the nexus of power and performance that: “Indigenous approaches to knowledge are not incorporated into the general politics of truth in Western society, and this exclusion also characterizes Western Academic discourse” (47).

One of the distinguishing things about plays, however, is their orality. Theatrical adaptations of historical and cultural narratives speak them in the continuous present of performance. They can cross the line between the mainly western literary discourse that creates a fiction of mimetic representation, and approach the oral culture’s employment of words to embody rather than to represent reality. This is a more positive way of approaching the often discussed need for Aboriginal writers to adapt their stories to white theatrical paradigms. The adaptations are not all one way. Jack Davis employed Aboriginal language, music and dancing in plays such as *Kullark* and *The Dreamers*, a destabilising technique that fulfils the post-colonial prescription of de-centring English, of problematising the question of authenticity, of inscribing difference as a component of identity. In this last technique, he drew attention to the fact that every one of us is somebody else’s “other.”

A more recent and risky attempt to include Aboriginal protocols on a western stage was seen at the 2002 Adelaide Festival, in *The Career Highlights of the Mamu*, by Scott Rankin and Trevor Jamieson. There the staging included a camp-fire, the casual summoning of individuals to centre-stage to tell their stories, the need for a translator when elders used their own language—in fact a range of Aboriginal protocols which were anti-theatrical practices (in western terms), used alongside technologically sophisticated visual and aural accompaniments. The central dramatic conflict was embodied in this contrast. The play demonstrated that Hiroshima and the Tjuntjuntjara country near the borders of South and Western Australia, both had nuclear victims, and that the indigenous Australians killed and maimed by atomic testing were denied and excised from official and unofficial records. Here in fact was another version of the silencing of black deaths by white officialdom, the kind of Windschuttling that has gone on with Tasmanian black deaths in particular.

Of course the term “cultural narratives” takes one back to Edward Said, and the question of cultural hegemony also involves revisiting Foucault. The issue of the relative power of the written text over the oral is recast in Said’s discussion to include the cultural contestation between academic knowledges and imaginative meanings. Historical texts, particularly those written by conservative historians, are rarely aware of, or prepared to concede the fact of, the created aspect of so called “factual” writing, particularly the representations of the “other,” let alone the embedded assumptions such as racial superiority, that their texts contain.

Imaginative writing by indigenous Australians, particularly that for the stage, can employ subversive strategies in borrowings from western literary and stage models (one example is the Brer Rabbit character that we find in plays such as Richard Whalley's *Munjong*) but also embody truth telling in the act of speaking itself. Sometimes this looks like an adaptation of a western tradition, such as "giving witness," what Helen Gilbert refers to as "testimonial" (326), which declares the truth-value of subjectivity, something superbly developed in a number of autobiographical Aboriginal works such as Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony*, Wesley Enoch and Debra Mailman's *The Seven Stages of Grieving*, Deborah Cheetham's *White Baptist Abba Fan*, Tom E. Lewis's *Thumbul* and *Lift 'Em Up Socks*, Ningali Lawson's *Ningali* and Tammy Anderson's *I Don't Want to Play House*. Hybridity in various forms is a well-documented postcolonial strategy that can be confronting and subversive and sometimes has a particular fitness in expressing the mixed racial and cultural heritage of many Aborigines. It also complicates assumptions that naturalism is the stage convention to which Aboriginal writing has almost exclusively adapted itself.

Stolen, by Jane Harrison, provides an interesting example of an adaptation of fictional biographies into a different realm of truth-telling, through the device of linking the five children's stories with the real-life stories of the actors, each of whom tells the audience, as actors and Aborigines, at the end of the play, of their own family's involvement in the stolen generations narrative. Deborah Cheetham does something similar towards the end of her story when the names of the many prematurely dead members of her Aboriginal family are projected onto a screen behind her.

The Playbox opening of *Stolen* in October 1998, a little over a year after the tabling in Parliament of the *Bringing Them Home* report, suggested that this play might be an adaptation of the report, a perfect example of an imaginative transformation of empiricism into poeticism. In fact *Stolen* was a much re-written version of a play called *The Lost Children* that was first produced in the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 1992, and its sources were various and multitudinous. These ranged from an Aboriginal Law Bulletin called *Saving the Children*, an occasional paper by Peter Read produced for the New South Wales Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs called *The Stolen Generations*, the Richard Franklin film *Who Killed Malcolm Smith*, the Canberra collection of oral narratives called "Many Voices," numerous newspaper articles, and countless stories told by individual Aborigines with personal or family experience of stolen children. Not only did this play have an enormous impact on its many audiences, including those in London (although one English critic called it "banal," a perfect example of the crucial cultural specificity of the piece), it also drew attention to the truth subjectivity of oral history. As well, it foregrounded an issue that has by now become almost ubiquitous in other Aboriginal plays. The fact that it was originally com-

missioned by the Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-Operative indicates that it is not entirely inaccurate to describe the play as an adaptation of oral history into performance art. It represents a selection of representative stories from the vast oral history archives of Aboriginal Australians, only some of which have found their way into print. Its power also derives from the incorporation of so many other Aboriginal narratives, usually recast in various white discourses, all of which are shown to have been caused by child theft. These range from serial child theft, sexual abuse, alcoholism, suicide in custody, cultural confusion, violence, mental illness to physical and psychological cruelty. In *Stolen*, the negative, racist stereotypes of Aboriginality can be deconstructed to reveal their source in the grotesque imbalance of power between black and white, neatly captured in the utter powerlessness of black children in an orphanage.

An even more literal adaptation of a white text into a black narrative can be found in Richard J. Frankland's *Conversations With the Dead*, first performed at the Carlton Courthouse in February, 2002. Once again there is a deliberate blurring of fictional character and autobiographical confession. The character of Jack (a performance that won Aaron Pederson a Green Room Award) is a thinly disguised Frankland, whose experience as the only indigenous member of the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody cost him dearly. Jack begins with a direct address to the audience:

Imagine that you're a Koorie, that you're in your mid-twenties, that your job is to look into the lives of the dead and the process, policy and attitude that killed them.

Imagine seeing that much death and grief that you lose your family, and you begin to wonder at your own sanity.

Imagine when the job's over but the nightmares remain and the deaths keep on happening more than ever.

What would you do? Where would you put the memories? What would keep you sane? Who do you think could understand what you carry inside you? (221)

In the play Frankland is giving witness to another Aboriginal killing field, and as the only indigenous participant in the investigation, he assumes the burden of spokesperson for his culture. The play is a massive subversion of the official report, converting its official form and conclusions into a testimony that claims for the subjugated narrative all the power of performance, its huge emotional affect, its confrontation of actors and audience in the same time and place, its demand that we witness the ongoing cost of killing black people in what Said called the "disorientations of direct encounters with the human" (93). In fact it draws upon all the power of the imaginative work, of a work of literature as well as perform-

ance, using songs and music, for example, to great effect, to make us understand the horrendously destructive cultural encounter that has characterized black/white relations in Australia from the start.

Other significant cultural narratives are woven into the background, notably the stolen children. Like *Stolen*, *Conversations with the Dead* dramatizes a series of stories about individuals with whom, because they are dead, Frankland can only imagine conversations. Where Harrison's play condenses hundreds of stolen stories, *Conversations* similarly condenses into a handful of stories, the 124 deaths in custody in an eight year period, of which 99 were investigated and for which no one was ever charged. The play represents not only an adaptation, in the loose sense in which I am using it, of an official report that was in part written by the play's author, but also an imaginative reworking of the many spoken sources behind this report. Frankland was almost broken by the ordeal of listening to the narratives of death, and by having to convert them into a whitefella official document, but he found some kind of healing in then undertaking a further adaptation into a play, where some of those voices could be given a public airing.

Keith Windshuttle et al. have made much of the numbers game, of claiming that only a miniscule number of Aborigines died at the hands of white men. Frankland's numbers make an interesting addition to these sums, and the employment of lists of names has become a potent tool in several plays. Jack Davis began it in *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*, with the names of the deaths in custody victims; Deborah Mailman listed others, the contents of her suitcase of photographs of the dead, in *The Seven Stages of Grieving*; Deborah Cheetham listed the deaths in her own family.¹ It can hardly have been accidental that Rodney Hall, at the end of his historical play *A Return to the Brink*, about the Myall Creek massacres and the trials that followed, lists the white names of the survivors of the frontier wars. The young officer in charge of the massacre, who has been allowed to escape justice because of his class and freeborn status, considers what new name he might take for himself. It is a long speech, dotted with names that have an ironic, contemporary, political resonance, but it is almost certainly a deliberate appropriation of an already-recognized Aboriginal theatrical device:

Is this how we hold on to land they won't give us? Haunted land. To keep for our children—children whose names might be anything? Even I might take any name I choose: Wilson, perhaps, or Cunningham, or Pascoe, or Murphy. My children part of all that marrying and intermarrying. They will be the ones to understand. Violence goes with the country. If you want new land you have to take it. Yes. If you want to stay you do. And we will stay [. . .] Everyone looked to me for permission: like men in battle. Including those four who've been left off—those four others out there—the

four who know. And they know I did it too. I did. They could still have children too, couldn't they? They might also take new names. What names? Their offspring may as easily be called Smith or Jackson, Gipps or Wentworth for all anyone knows, or O'Connor, or Whitelock, Matthews, McKenzie or Hanson. The possibilities are endless. The young, surviving. Known as Unsworth, Petersen, Thomas, Llewellyn, Murdoch, Johnson, Marsh, Appleby, Carruthers, Williams, Morgan—working and living as doctors, farmers, coalminers, blacksmiths, housewives, clerks. I can see it, and we'll pass an act of parliament to prove we were in the right—will we begin calling ourselves “the real Australians”? Meanwhile they lie dead. Murdered. While we go on, inexorably on, from generation to generation, as Millers, Merediths and Ladislaws? As McEvoy's, Costas, Carmodies, Julls, Bulls, Butchers, Anguses, Menadues, Wagners and Woolfs, Quinns and Quincies, Pickerings and Packers, Joneses, O'Donoghues, Evanses, Fullers—seizing the golden future—Goddards, Archers, Devereuxs, Hindmarshs, Sinclairs, Brays, and Berrymans. What name will be without this inheritance? And without the wealth that goes with it? Duggan? Reith? Alexandrov? Coombe? Holland? Karinski? Van der Veer? Wang? Wotton? Kaufmann? Any of them? Moran, O'Donnell, MacDonald, Donaldson, Don, Dunne. I feel the day behind me as dark as night. Hetherington, Cavanagh, Costello, Behan, Armstrong, Hall, Conway, Hamilton, Stewart, Crowley, Farrell, Farrugia, Nakano, Fox and Graham, Fyfe and Grundy, Hickson, Houghton, Howard, Scott, Costi, Bradhurst, Carlino, Carlysle, Cameron, Brown, Green, West, North, Old, Young. (Hall 63–64)

Hall claims in his Note to the play that it is not a historical play, but rather a historical metaphor for present-day Australia. “It is a play about Australia right now. It does not purport to re-enact scenes that actually occurred. The characters of Sir George Gipps and William Charles Wentworth are fictions built around a core of fact. All the other characters are entirely my invention. However, the major events which make up the action did happen” (65). The fact that the Myall Creek murders were the only occasion on which white men were tried and hanged has made it a very important episode in the frontier narratives. Hall's political position could only be described as oppositional to the Windshuttle one, and yet his speaking position, as a white dramatist, has given the political point an oddly self-contradictory twist. In the play he has heroicized a white man, Governor Gipps, who insisted upon a second trial of the murderers, and hence brought about the hanging of seven of them (all of them ex-convicts), and thereby de-

fended the justice of white man's law. Yet he tempers this justice by having Gipps connive at the escape of the young officer who had been in charge of the massacre. Here are the markers of the victors' version of events, in this case guilt-ridden, but inevitably accepting that present-day white Australians claim their very identity, their names, on the basis of murder.

Andrew Bovell's play *Holy Day*, first performed in South Australia in 2001, is another frontier play, one that links the stolen generation stories with those of the massacres. It contains the same message as Hall's; that building a white nation can only be done by murdering the blacks. A white woman, Nora, who had her own child taken at the age of 15, has stolen a black child. The other white woman, Elizabeth, has killed her own baby. Nora's black "daughter" Obedience is accused of the murder. A massacre of a tribal group of Aborigines, including twelve children, ensues, ostensibly for the murder but really for the land and the killing of sheep. The two white women represent a damned whore and a god's policewoman, although their moral characters are suggestively reversed in the end. Every character, except the pitifully named Obedience, makes moral compromises. Only the Jew, Epstein, sacrifices himself, in vain, trying to warn the blacks. The significant absence in the play is the black mother of Obedience, the stolen child. The two helpless victims of the violence and malice of the ex-convict Goudry, have their tongues cut out to ensure their silence. The cutting out of Obedience's tongue symbolizes, sickeningly, the white crime of obliterating any record of atrocities such as the massacre that she witnesses.

The lost child was one of the most emotionally charged motifs of nineteenth-century Australian literature, symbol of the white man's fear of the bush and the inability to survive in it. Bovell's play examines the calamitous historical slippages between "lost," "taken" and "stolen," shifts that take us into genocidal territory where racial obliteration is attempted by ensuring there are no children left. The play is an adaptation of the Henry Reynolds side of the history wars, imaginatively retelling it as a horror story greatly empowered by its spare writing, simplicity and epic scale. The bloody work of making mute any possible witnesses for the prosecution is a graphic retort to all those enthusiastic Windshuttlers in the academies and in the press.

Also relevant to this topic is one directly literary adaptation, Nick Enright and Justin Monjo's adaptation of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, and also Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's *The Seven Stages of Grieving*. The latter is interesting in terms of both adaptation and hybridity, for its combining of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Dying (Denial, Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance) with the seven Phases of Aboriginal history (Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-Determination and Reconciliation). The play of *Cloudstreet*² made rather more than Winton's novel had of the Black Man who acts as one of the commentators. The stolen generation is there in the haunted

house at One Cloud Street which had once been an institution for black girls, and there again, along with hints of massacre perhaps, in the epiphany in the wheat fields when the vision of black children transfixes the white Holy Family of Quick, Rose, Fish and Wax Harry. But these are all background presences, sorrowing notes in an otherwise celebratory epic of Australian working class family life. Indigenous Australians have become, as they are in the history disputes, a significant absence rather than a presence. It is to the black writers that we must look for affirmations of their own identity.

This brief look at some of the possibilities of theatrical adaptation of cultural narratives has been intended to emphasize the stage's unique ability to provide a place for the spoken voice to answer, in public, the denials of Aboriginal experience in Australia's post-contact history contained within the pro-Windshuttle historical polemics. Unfortunately, as Said pointed out some time ago, it is as easy to ignore the truth of imaginative writing as it is oral narratives in any form, even within the culturally specific white territory of the theatre.

ENDNOTES

- 1 An interesting though "unofficial" Aboriginal document was appended to the program of *The Bridge*, a play performed as part of the Torch Project, Re-igniting Community North West, in December, 2003, a community and cultural theatre development work. This was a "Massacre Map of Victoria," marking and detailing 68 sites where Aboriginals were killed, in total representing several thousand people killed between 1836 and 1853.
- 2 There is an excellent analysis of *Cloudstreet's* adaptive techniques in Peter Fitzpatrick's review of the playtext in *Australian Drama Studies*, October, 2000, 99–101.

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