

# RADIANT WOMEN ON RADIANT COUNTRY

by ANDREA JAMES

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A response to:  
*Radiance*  
by Louis Nowra

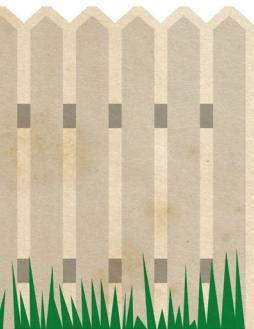


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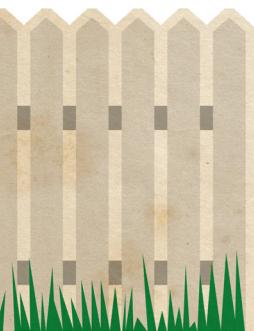
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## Author's Biography



ANDREA JAMES graduated from LaTrobe University with a Bachelor of Art in Drama in 1991 and then went on to complete a Bachelor of Dramatic Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts in 1996. Andrea was the Artistic Director of Melbourne Workers' Theatre for almost seven years from 2001 to 2008. James is best known for writing and directing *Yanagai! Yanagai!*—a play about her father's people, the Yorta Yorta, and their struggle for land rights justice.

James was dramaturg to Lou Bennett's one-woman cabaret *Show us ya Tiddas!*, produced by the Melbourne Workers' Theatre, and wrote a short play *The Forever Zone* for White Whale Theatre at Fortyfivedownstairs in Melbourne. She has also been the Aboriginal Arts Development Officer at Blacktown City Council and has developed a new cross-artform work entitled *To Soothe the Dying Pillow* while in residence at Performance Space in Carriageworks in December 2011.

Most recently James directed *Bully Beef Stew* with three Aboriginal men at PACT Theatre and co-wrote *Corranderk: We Will Show the Country* with Giordano Nanni produced by La Mama and Ilbjerri Theatre. She recently finished a short play entitled *Winyanboga Yurringa* inspired by Hyllus Maris and Sonia Borg's iconic *Women of the Sun*.

Andrea is currently Artistic Associate at Carriageworks.

## RADIANT WOMEN ON RADIANT COUNTRY

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Well, they say that, ‘behind every great man there’s a great woman’, and behind the 1993 play *Radiance* there is not one but three great BLACK women, later to be followed by one other. Little is known of the influence that Kuku Yalanji woman Lydia Miller (who played Cressy in the first production) and Bundjalung woman Rhoda Roberts (who played Nona) had on Louis Nowra’s play—developed at a critical time in Australia’s theatre landscape—and although their voices can be heard loud and clear in the text, as a Yorta Yorta/Kurnai woman myself, I wanted to hear first hand from these two women who have come to greatly influence Aboriginal art and culture today.

In amongst their busy schedules I interviewed Lydia Miller at her Australia Council office (she is currently the Executive Director of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Arts Panel) and emailed Rhoda Roberts (Indigenous Producer at the Sydney Opera House and creative force behind the recent Boomerang and Homeground festivals) and Meriam/Yidinji/Dutch woman, Rachael Maza (Artistic Director of Ilbijjerri Aboriginal Theatre, who played Mae in the premiere production at Belvoir) while she was networking in Europe on behalf of Ilbijjerri.

Lydia and Rhoda were not only acting colleagues as they embarked upon their creative careers in the late 1980s, but also shared another profession together—nursing—which greatly influenced the dark and macabre humor within *Radiance*. As young actresses their creative and cultural paths were paved by some of our greatest Aboriginal actors and theatre-makers. Lydia had this to say:

‘You had people like Brian Syron [Lydia and Rhoda’s acting coach]... Bob Maza [Rachael Maza’s father], Vivian Walker... Richard Walley, Maureen Watson, Eva Johnson, [and] of course Justine Saunders...’

Rhoda Roberts also acknowledged the theatre elders they looked up

to:

‘Those old men and women [referring also to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis and Kevin Gilbert] had written and performed when it was against the law... they grew us up, they knew our families, they knew where we fitted not only in our own community [but] they looked into our eyes, they listened to our hunger and knew where we would fit in the world.’

It’s hard to believe it now, but it wasn’t until 1987 that the first ever National Black Playwrights’ Conference was held at the Australian National University in Canberra, which was followed by another Conference in 1989 at Macquarie University in Sydney. These conferences were looking to support a new generation of Aboriginal playwrights and correct the severe lack of Aboriginal stories and characters on stage and screens at that time. Lydia and Rhoda were an important part of the delegations at these first two conferences and witnessed the resolution to ensure Richard Walley’s new play *Munjong* would go into production under the newly formed Aboriginal National Theatre Trust (ANTT). The ANTT had a three year charter to produce a second playwrights’ conference and three new productions.

*Munjong* explored the relationship between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men and after it was produced, complex and well-rounded roles for Aboriginal actors began to (very slowly) emerge. While currently there are a host of outstanding Aboriginal plays, films and television series, (*Redfern Now* and *The Gods of Wheat Street* on ABC television to name a couple), when Lydia and Rhoda were stomping the boards in the late 1980s this was certainly not the case, as Lydia affirms:

‘So it was easy to get a lawyer’s role because they [non-Aboriginal writers] were comfortable with the notion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were lawyers... People had experienced the fact that there were black doctors around, what they could never get their heads over is something

like an Indigenous family living in the burbs in Australia... like *Neighbours*... [or] *Home and Away*... We very actively lobbied the Federation of Commercial Television Networks and had roundtable meetings with them to talk about having Indigenous characters within that milieu...’

Unfortunately there has been a sad tradition in this country of casting non-Aboriginal actors in Aboriginal roles. The Aboriginal acting fraternity had already copped it sweet when the series *Boney* was aired in 1972 and Fauna Productions (who produced *Skippy*) shipped an actor over from New Zealand (James Laurenson) who ‘blacked up’ for the role. The television networks ignored the controversy and the strong statements made by Aboriginal leaders at that time such as Faith Bandler and Charlie Perkins; but when Grundy once again cast a non-Aboriginal actor (Cameron Daddo) for a remake of the series in 1992 the production companies were finally set straight—but it was a long time coming.

The great actress, Justine Saunders had struggled with limited roles for Aboriginal women for years, and as an important mentor to Lydia and Rhoda they began to agitate for change. Lydia said:

‘As young actresses we were very close to Justine... [who had] constantly advocated and championed roles for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actresses beyond just being a stereotypical character within a play... “victim, raped and murdered” as Justine used to say... it was very important to move the landscape in terms of the depiction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters...’

While the two Black Playwrights’ Conferences were very slowly shifting this landscape, the ANTT folded after three years and Lydia and Rhoda remained hungry for good roles for women. Spurred on by their mentor, Justine Saunders, and encouraged by her partner at the time (Louis Nowra), Lydia and Rhoda were agitating for something better. Something challenging and real. They could either wait around for an eternity for good roles to appear, or they would make it happen

themselves; so they approached Louis and pitched to him the idea to collaborate and write them a play about three sisters. Lydia outlined their approach:

‘The process started out, with us saying “we’d like to look at three sisters, three women... No mention of them being Aboriginal because we don’t want you to write something that is about the Aboriginal experience. What we’ll bring to the play is our own experiences as Aboriginal women that will inhabit the character.” Anybody could do this play... three white girls could do it, three Jamaican girls could do it, three Lebanese girls could do it, any three women could do it and what would be brought to the actual theatrical experience is the manifestation of their own references or values that would give life to that incredible character weight that each one of them had.’

So over many dinner parties the women and Louis yarned and retold stories. They talked at length about landscape, isolation and being on the wrong side of the tracks. But what is so refreshing about this play is its universality. The creative team looked outside of themselves. They looked to the world. They drew inspiration from archetypal Greek and Roman narratives, operatic meta-narratives, as well as the oppressive atmosphere of Jean Paul Sartre’s 1944 existentialist play *No Exit* and Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. They gave this play time and invested two years in its development together and they were savvy, as Rhoda retells it:

‘We wanted a success from a box office perspective and a high quality produced touring show, and so we also looked at the marketing and strategic sell of ticketing, what was the flavour of the month that the audiences were coming to see.’

They very much wanted this play to be a psychological play (not a political play) and they were deeply conscious of what they wanted their audiences to experience, said Lydia:

‘We didn’t want an Aboriginal reference because it’s too easy

for an audience to go “Oh well I’ll just attribute all of those characteristics because they’re Aboriginal” and they can disconnect from their own human reality...’

*Radiance* is the product of a true and highly successful collaboration that succeeded because Louis Nowra listened to these women and he gave them what they wanted (smart man). If you’ve ever met Lydia Miller, Rhoda Roberts or the late Auntie Justine Saunders, you might say that Louis Nowra could never have said no to these very strong women, even if he wanted to. As Rachael Maza remembers it, freshly graduated from WAAPA and coming into the process when the play was in rehearsal:

‘Because Lydia and Rhoda were the ones to approach Louis with the idea some time ago I always had the feeling they felt they had ownership over the story, and Louis was respectful of their feedback. There was no doubt he had a healthy ego but he wasn’t silly enough to go up against those women.’

Louis Nowra listened deeply to this small posse of sharp and audacious Aboriginal women. He respected and understood them and together they created something powerful and strong, that Lydia, Rhoda and Rachael triumphantly brought to the stage under the direction of Rosalba Clemente when the work premiered at Belvoir in the Upstairs theatre on the 21st of September 1993. And from the moment the play opens with the character of Mae flicking live matches at an empty chair, the tension in the atmosphere is palpable. Thick. She is the unfavoured half-sister. That image of her—this first, potent action—sets the scene for what is to turbulently unfold in this resonant and powerful work.

The play ain’t no kitchen-sink, bourgeois drama. Thankfully there’s not a kitchen sink in sight—just a far North Queensland house high up on stilts on the fringes of town receiving, filtering and magnifying all of the elements that the sea and the land can throw at it. It is in this house in the sky with a tropical storm brewing, that long suppressed family secrets begin to unfurl. Whilst the unseen ghost of Cressy, Mae

and Nona's Mother is an ever-present fourth character in this play, the house itself comes to represent masculine violence and oppression, which all of them have faced.

Amongst all of the complexity of family secrets and complicated relationships lies a deeper implicit tragedy about Aboriginal dispossession. The sisters' mother lived a life of torture where she could see the island of her people from the back verandah of her house, but could never go back there after it was taken over by the exploitative economy of tourism—nobody on the mainland talks about when, why and how Aboriginal people were removed. That house she lived in was given to her as a 'gift' but it would never really be her own. She had children, but she gave them away and so she could never really call them her own either.

This play works because it gives us, the audience, the freedom to draw our own political context around the work and in my mind the play was no doubt influenced by the promise of Mabo (the landmark decision was finally made in 1992 while the play was being written). Ironically, the women play out the roles of the victimised—raped and bashed once again—but refreshingly we never see any men on stage, instead we celebrate the women's revenge and survival through a deeply embedded connection to their mother's country—they overcome.

At the last Australian Theatre Forum held in Canberra in 2013 there was a lot of talk from the Aboriginal delegates on the floor about the need to provide protocols for non-Aboriginal writers and theatre-makers working with Aboriginal stories and characters. If ever we need a good model for Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal collaboration, perhaps *Radiance* can be seen as a guiding light. Ultimately, what was important to this collaborative team was integrity and the expression of truth, not representation. As Lydia pointed out:

'They say that good writers are good thieves... I don't write, but you know I guess in terms of having been a performer, I do know that writers steal from everyday life... In a creative way... So any

character has to be located in truth... a good actor will steal from everyday life... you will see something in society because you are holding the mirror up and you will steal, not even steal, you will take that grain of truth—universal truth—about people and you will weave that into a total fabric.’

This play was initiated and driven by two Aboriginal actresses and this is what makes it truly powerful and unique. They were empowered. Lydia Miller summed it up like this:

‘When you start off with a text you have so much freedom, especially when its been written for you or when you’re there at the genesis of it and involved ... The freedom to control it or the freedom to explore, the freedom to realise something that you weren’t quite sure about and then turn the pivot of the focus of that narrative. That’s enormous freedom, that’s an incredibly creative environment.’

Too often Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal ‘collaborations’ (whilst undoubtedly respectful and mindful) are still initiated and power-driven by white men—Scott Rankin, Michael Kantor, Neil Armfield, to name a few. In collaborations the points of power and control need to be acknowledged and negotiated respectfully.

It is no accident that the three Aboriginal women who premiered in the stage play of *Radiance* have each become leading and highly influential figures in the Aboriginal theatre and arts scene, and yet I wonder, do the next generation of young Aboriginal women actors still feel dissatisfied with the roles that are given to them? And if so, who would they commission to write for them—would they even dare?

As I praised Lydia and Rhoda for their audaciousness at the time, Lydia promptly corrected me:

‘I’m not going to romanticise it, but I’m going to say this—when you don’t have work you have two choices; you can either stop

and go... “go find yourself a nine to five office job”, or you can get on with it and you can create your work. So don’t romanticise it. I looked at all of the groundwork that Justine [Saunders], Brian [Syron] and Vivian [Walker] did [and] the fact that we were generating playwright conferences to get the work out there. I don’t like whingeing in the arts, it’s self indulgent and really if you believe in the vision of what you want to convey you’ll find a way to tell that story... It seems like at the time we were kind of ballsy, but really we just went, “Listen I want to work... [and] I’m not going to play someone’s girlfriend... No!” To see the change you have to create the change.’

Rachael Maza, the Artistic Director of Ilbijerri Theatre Company, one the few Aboriginal theatre companies in this country (Moogahlin Performing Arts and Yirra Yaakin being two others of note) put it this way:

‘I guess the biggest issue for me with *Radiance* was the need to bring in a white writer, and I believe we are passed this stage—we have the writers! We have the talent!’

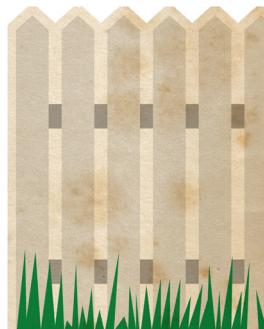
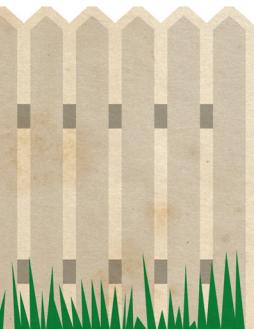
This is what those Black Playwrights’ Conferences in 1987 and 1989 set out to achieve. Nevertheless, the collaboration behind *Radiance*, driven by Lydia and Rhoda, was still groundbreaking. The gift that Lydia and Rhoda and Auntie Justine Saunders (through Louis) have given to us with this play is hope against adversity. They refused to be sentimental and they burnt a part of history for us—then they healed it—showing us the power of women’s strength and a cultural connection to country and each other that pervades. They showed us that the land and the water are full of ceremony and culture and as long as people walk on this land, this will always be. This is the stuff that’s radiant. The radiance that shines—what Wiradjuri choreographer Vicki Van Hout encapsulated in her dance work *Briwyant* when she wanted to bring to light the shimmer effect of traditional paintings—Our Eternal Spirit. Louis Nowra’s *Radiance* is Rhoda Roberts’, Lydia Miller’s, Rachael Maza’s and Auntie Justine Saunders’ *Radiance* too. Radiant women on radiant Country.

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