

THE MAKINGS OF A MAN

by JOHN HARDING

A response to:
No Sugar
by Jack Davis



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Author's Biography



JOHN HARDING has had several of his plays staged locally and overseas. He has been a ministerial adviser for the Victorian Department of Aboriginal Affairs; Senior Project Officer for the Aboriginal Education Department; National Aboriginal Employment Co-ordinator for the Australian Film Commission; Assistant Director for the 1989 National Black Playwrights' Conference; Artistic Director of the 1996 Nambundah Festival; and a founding member of the Ilbijerri Aboriginal Theatre Company in Melbourne. His play, *Up the Road*, was Ilbijerri's first production and it won the Australian Human Rights Award for its second extended production and national tour in 1997. Belvoir Theatre toured nationally with the play, which was directed by Neil Armfield. John has also directed his own work, including *Enuff*, *No Parking* and *Second Helping*. He co-wrote and co-starred in *Blak and Tran II* (2004) with Hung Le and *Natives Striking Blak* (2007) for Ilbijerri Theatre.

His radio credits include: *Land Rights*, *Rally* and *Blackman and Sobbin*. For television his credits include: *Lift Off*, *Blackout* and the indigenous current affairs program, *ICAM*. While at SBS, he created the first Indigenous comedy show for the network, *The Masters*, directed by Michael Riley.

John is also a published poet, and in 2007 he completed his first film about the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act anniversary Festival, *Nganampa Manta*. In 2008, he followed up with the documentary *Fitzroy Stars: More than a Game*, for ABC TV, which aired the same year.

THE MAKINGS OF A MAN

‘The end in view will justify the means employed.’ So said A.O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, 1915–1936.

To understand this play, you must first understand the man.

I was first inspired to write after reading Jack Davis’ *No Sugar* in the late 1980s. I wrote my first play, *Up The Road*, soon after in 1990. I began to research Jack Davis, as writers do, and found the makings of a man I had always wanted to emulate.

Jack Davis was born in Perth in 1917, but spent his youth in Yarloop, about 140 kilometres to the south. His father died in a tragic accident when he was 13 years old, and he had to travel to find work. He started moving north and found many jobs, including itinerant labourer, windmill man, horse breaker, boundary man, drover and stockman.

At this young age he witnessed with indignation the oppression, racism and hate that his people were facing, and began to write poetry.

He met a man named Worru, who was from the same area as his father. Worru instilled in him a love of storytelling, and taught him the Bibulman language.

The government policy at that time was that Aboriginal people were not allowed in the towns after 6pm, but Jack refused to adhere. He was locked up as a youth for four days. He realised he was living in an Apartheid system, and when he returned to Perth he joined the Aboriginal Advancement Council and began agitating for changes in the government’s policies.

For five years he was the editor of the Aboriginal periodical *Identity* and used this vehicle to support emerging writers. Jack spent his

whole life relentlessly fighting for the rights of his people, and became the first patron of the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee. One of his most famous poems, *John Pat*, paid tribute to this tragic story of a young man in Roeburne, Western Australia whose death triggered the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

A humanitarian, Jack will always be remembered for his writings on Aboriginal history and culture, which gained him national and international recognition, and helped to build bridges between cultures and communities.

It is therefore interesting that he based *No Sugar* in the early 1930s, a time when he would have been setting out into the world to confront a society that didn't value him or his humanity.

The play is set in the Avon Valley town of Northam. The Munday/Millimurra family live on the outskirts of town at the Government Well Aboriginal Reserve.

The Aboriginal characters are a great example of the different attitudes that Aboriginal people had in the 1930s, a time where elders had lived and remembered their traditional life and culture, but the younger generation grew up on Reserves, needing permits to visit town and witnessing the criminalisation of their language and customs, and all that that entailed.

Behind the government policies of the time resided the formidable A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines for Western Australia.

Through his representation of A.O. Neville, Jack Davis provides the reader and audience member with a character who encapsulates the attitudes of the white Australian governments of the day towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

During the 1930s, there were government inspectors, or Boards for the Protection of Aborigines, in every state and territory, the role of which I liken to that of a medieval bishop. They were, in many ways,

a law unto themselves and given only meagre amounts to undertake their governmental duties. The 1905 Aborigines Act relegated people of Aboriginal descent to the status of second class citizens, with restrictions placed both on their movement and on where they were legally permitted to reside. Section 12 of the Aborigines Act gave the Chief Protector the authority to remove Aboriginal people to an Aboriginal reserve and keep them there. He also had guardianship over Aboriginal children under the age of sixteen until 1936, and under the age of twenty-one from 1936—1940.

The Chief Protector could also send his charges to the Moore River Settlement, or to any mission, and keep them there against their will. If they ran away, he could demand the police pursue them and bring them back.

The character of Sergeant Carrol in *No Sugar*, when placed in the context of the historical policies and governmental duties that would have been placed upon him, is very accurate. The police at the time were often placed in the role of protector of Aborigines, which saved the government the money they would have otherwise spent to employ someone specifically in that role. Given the manifold duties police already had, this additional responsibility often fell to the bottom of their list of priorities.

Sergeant Carrol's relationship with the Munday/Millimurra family is an interesting one. Compelled by law to carry out his duty, he knows in his heart that the justice he swore as a policeman to dispense is not being dispensed equally.

The relationship Carrol has with the women in the family in particular is one of grudging respect, as he knows that they are the ones holding the family together, and trying to keep things in order. The following quote (page 16) reflects the tenor of their relationship. Gran sees through Carrol's disingenuous concern for her welfare, and her lack of respect for authority lets him know that she is nobody's fool:

The SERGEANT places flour, sugar and two small packages on the

bench and marks them off in his ration book.

SERGEANT: Flour, sugar, tea... And how you been keepin', Granny?

GRAN: I'm awright.

SERGEANT: Been behavin' yourself?

GRAN: Have you?

Gran Munday is like a conglomerate of women I grew up around, from a generation that was fast being forgotten. They were the last generation to live a totally traditional lifestyle and culture. As they were the natural and cultural matriarchs, they felt a strong sense of helplessness as they witnessed the power they held within their families being whittled away by a succession of government policies.

These women knew what was happening to their people was inherently wrong, yet they were dismissed because they were women, told to keep to their place, and seen as irrelevant, nothing more than a distraction. The government, as accurately portrayed in *No Sugar*, valued the male and younger members of the family as they could be useful in white society: stockman and labourer jobs awaited Jimmy, Joe and David, and a domestic role would suit Cissie nicely. But these old women—scared by what they saw lay ahead for their future generations—were often the feistiest in the family, as I have heard recollected countless times by Aboriginal writers, acquaintances and friends. Gran's role within the family, that of forming the link between family members and the traditional lifestyle, instead of being seen as something useful, would be viewed as an opposing element to the government policies of the day.

While Gran's role is obviously significant, Joe Millimurra is, in my eyes, the chief protagonist of *No Sugar*. One only has to read the first ten pages to realise that there is a common thread of rebellion being passed between Gran and Joe—a mutual, overarching familial concern which is the catalyst for the narrative.

Joe refuses to be treated like a second class citizen, and although he does not want to leave his family he knows the only way to advance himself is to leave Government Well Aboriginal Reserve.

From a theatrical or storytelling perspective it is Joe who has the strongest arc of the journey. When we first meet him (pages 9-10), he is reading the *Western Mail*, while his Uncle Jimmy is decrying the Aborigines who are participating in the centenary celebrations of Western Australia's 'birth':

JOE: Headed by a tableau [...] Commemorating the pioneers whose lives [...] Were a steadfast performance of duty in the face of difficulty and danger. With them was a reminder of the dangers they faced, in the shape of three lorries [...] carrying Aborigines [...] dancing... to a brass band.

SAM: *Koorawurrung!* Nyoongahs corroboreein' to a *wetjala's* brass band!

JIMMY: Ah! That beats everything: stupid bloody blackfellas!

Joe shows little or no reaction to this article, yet one gets the feeling that beneath the quietness there is a reserve of emotion that will manifest in some way. It is the information which quickly follows that makes me reflect back on Joe's inaction. This comes from his mother Millie (page 10):

JIMMY: You fellas, you know why them wetjals marchin' down the street, eh? I'll tell youse why. 'Cause them bastards took our country and them blackfellas dancin' for 'em. Bastards!

MILLIE: Don't worry. If you woulda been there you woulda been right with 'em!

I remember when I first read this interaction, I was intrigued, as I would take that as a great insult if it came from my wife. When the reader finds out later that Jimmy, Sam and Millie were all brought

up in New Norcia Mission (as portrayed in the musical *Bran Nue Dae*) it becomes apparent that they were for a long time removed from their parents. In Joe's eyes, who has grown up with full access to his culture, language and a strong grandmother, there would be an element of pity and understanding of these three elders. This also explains why out of all the family, apart from Gran, he is the one who must take a patriarchal role, as he has not been culturally corralled. Joe is still a proud warrior, and he has the intelligence to see through the hypocrisies and lies the government were utilising to justify their treatment.

Joe's eventual meeting with Mary Dargurru, with whom he falls in love, further amplifies both his anger and sense of protection, as she tells him she is being pursued by the machiavellian Mr. Neal, the superintendent of Moore River Settlement (page 64):

JOE: Tell me what's the matter.

MARY: Mr. Neal.

JOE: Yeah, what about him?

MARY: He's tryin' to make me go and work at the hospital.

JOE: Well, what's wrong with that?

MARY: Everything.

JOE: You get better tucker.

MARY: It's more than that, Joe.

JOE: What d'ya mean?

MARY: When Mr. Neal sends a girl to work at the hospital, it usually

means...

JOE: Means what?

MARY: That he wants that girl... for himself.

JOE: *What?*

MARY: Everyone knows, even the *wetjalas*.

JOE: Rotten, stinkin', lowdown bastard. I'll kill him!

This information is the catalyst for Joe taking Mary away from Moore River Settlement and returning to Northam, where he grew up. Of course, when he returns, his childhood home and memories have been burnt—a vivid reminder of the lengths to which authorities would go to.

When Sergeant Carrol hears that not only is Joe back in town, but has abducted a girl from Moore River Settlement, he has no choice but to arrest him. These scenes brought to mind many metaphors, like the old fable about the Phoenix rising out of the ashes, to begin anew, to forge on, unshackling oneself from the past. The time Joe spent in prison gave him time to think, to sort out what needed to be done, both for himself and Mary, and then his family back at Moore River Settlement.

When Joe is finally released, and returns to find Mary both flogged with a cat'o nine tails whip, and pregnant, it is as if the old men (their spirits) talk to him. His initial anger and thirst for revenge would be self-gratification, which is diluted by Mary, and he realises he must put his family first.

In the final act, Superintendent Neal signs permission for Joe, Mary and child to leave. Joe must say goodbye to his family, as they have decided to return to his birthplace of Northam: his grandmother's unbroken country, his country, his wife's new country, and now his

baby's country.

Joe knows that he must maintain that link between the country and his family. To forget it would be to forget everything his grandmother taught him.

I had a strange afterthought as I finished reading *No Sugar*, which I consider to be Jack Davis' greatest work: there were parallels between the Bible and Joseph, Mary and a baby wandering out to the wilderness. Like an Aboriginal version of the three wise men, there was Millie giving the new family three dampers, two onions, two mugs, a frying pan, a billy can, a bit of dripping and a spud!

I never went to church, but maybe there is something in *No Sugar* for all of us.

Jack Davis and Jim Everett (from Cape Barren Island), the second Indigenous playwright whose work I ever read, inspired me to write eleven plays. These two men showed me the power of words, and the importance of distilling information, not just sharing it or wasting fame on self-pursuit.

No Sugar stands as a timeless reminder of the oppression Aboriginal people faced only eighty years ago and how it still impacts upon our lives—it reminds us that that your history is also mine.

Jack Davis, you are sadly missed.

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Copyright Agency's Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

'We developed the website and the resources with the specific aim of getting Australian literature back into schools', says Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund Manager, Zoë Rodriguez.

'The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.'

'Teacher resources have been developed in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW.'

The teacher resources include classroom activities, assessments and links to the new Australian curriculum. In addition, the secondary resources include an introduction to the text from high profile authors and artists, such as Libby Gleeson, David

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‘It’s a tremendous commitment to Australian authors, publishers, teachers, students and general readers’, Ms Rodriguez says. ‘We feel Reading Australia puts adored, but sometimes forgotten, Australian books back on people’s radars, beginning a whole new love affair with some of this country’s finest authors.’

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