

**MALTHOUSE
PROMPT**

UP THE ROAD

JOHN HARDING

PROMPT PACK / EDUCATION RESOURCE

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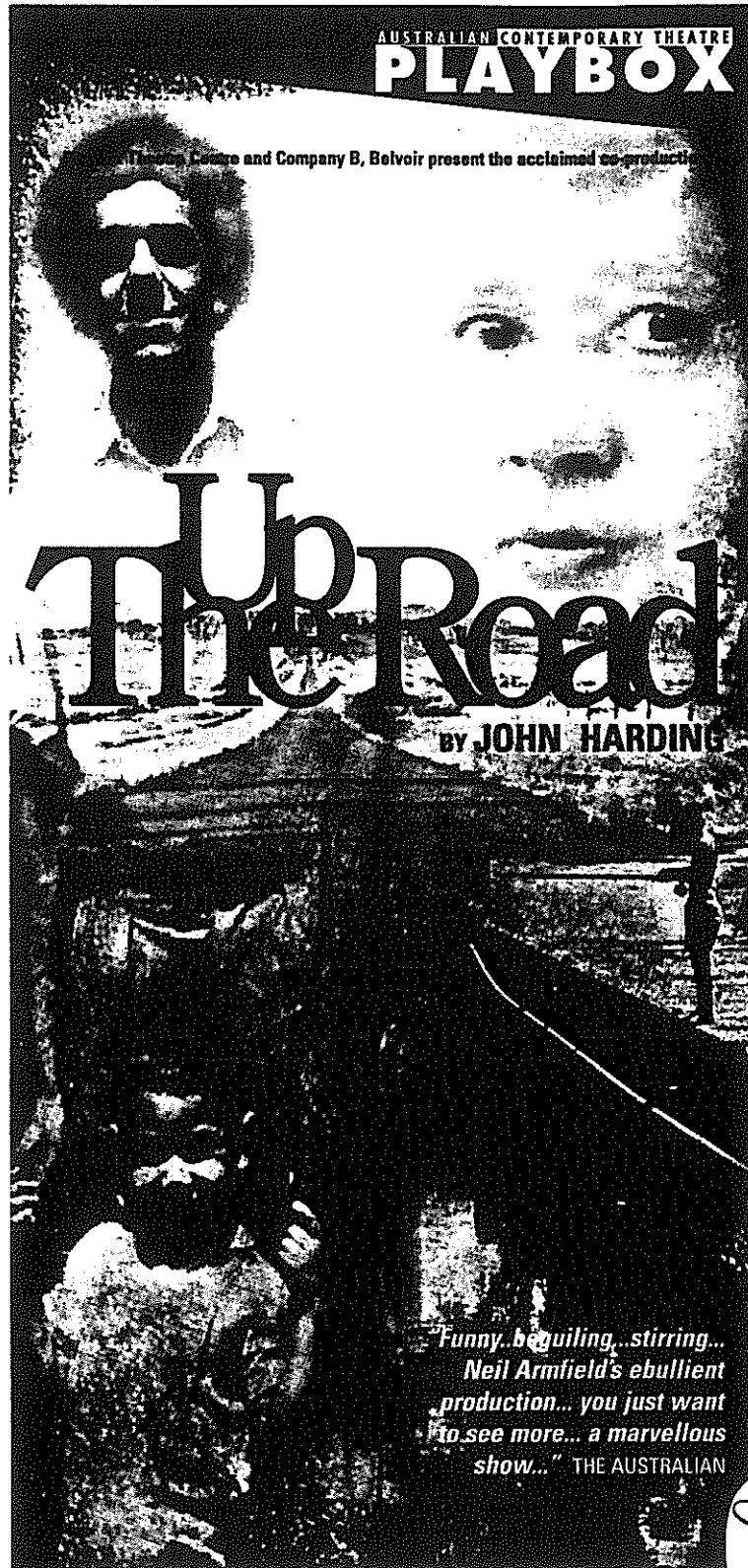
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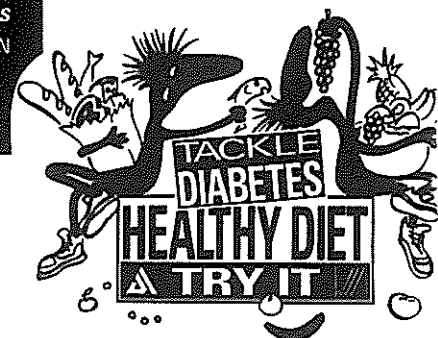
UP THE ROAD

by

John Harding



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INTERVIEW: JOHN HARDING

PLAYWRIGHT: UP THE ROAD

What was the starting point for writing Up The Road?

Really, it all commenced around 16 years ago when I was at the opening of National Aboriginal Week. The Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs was there for opening. After his speech he came up and said hello to my mother (who knew him before he was a Minister) and she said, "Look, my boy's just finished university, and he needs a job. Can you help him out?" And he said, "We're looking for a young, bright mind in Canberra. Would he like an interview?" And, before I knew it, I was whisked away in a government car to the airport and flown to Canberra. I met with him and he offered me a job with him in the public service in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Woden. He said this one thing to me - he said, "Canberra's a great place for a person with no responsibilities, and Aboriginal Affairs is the place to be because you can have a really bright future."

I didn't make a decision on that day about the job. I went home and I had a week or so to think about it. On the plane on the way home, I thought: that's an interesting thing for him to say, because one of the big problems that a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face, when they go into the public service is that, actually, they're not responsible to their community, they're responsible to their Minister. In other words, they serve two masters. So, it's quite ironic that he said if you have no responsibilities, it's good to work in Aboriginal Affairs because - especially if you're black - your responsibility is to your community, culturally.

So, out of that, came this poem that I wrote called *Pinstripe Blues* about the blacks that go to Canberra and work in the public service, and how they seem to lose their responsibility. They seem to lose the fact that they should be responsible in some way to their communities and, instead, they've become responsible to the government. That's what *Pinstripe Blues* was about. Out of that - that was 1982, or something - out of that came the play, actually. The play evolved out of that about eight years later. In 1990, I wrote *Up the Road* -and that was the starting point.

From the initial concept to the finished play, what sort of process did you undergo?

We created the Ilbijerri Theatre Company in 1990 and I was the founding member. We needed a play for our inaugural production - we didn't have one - so I wrote *Up the Road*. From there, we toured it for four weeks in 1991 to different community centres and Aboriginal centres around Melbourne; universities; and then it lay dormant for four or five years until the Australian National Playwrights' Conference.

I heard that May-Brit Ackerholt was looking for me because she wanted a Torres Strait Islander involved in the Conference and she'd never had one before (in terms of a playwright). We eventually connected and I submitted *Up the Road* (which at that stage was only one hour long, or so) and we workshopped it there for two weeks. The administrator of Belvoir came to see it on presentation day at the end of the Conference and commissioned it for Downstairs at the Belvoir. From there, magically, it somehow jumped from Downstairs at the Belvoir (it must have happened at a Board meeting or something) to Upstairs at the Belvoir, and Neil agreed to direct it.

At that stage, we collaborated quite closely for probably three or four months before rehearsals started - this is Neil and myself - working out the scene structures and the length and story line, etc. We changed quite a lot - it doubled in length for a start! I wrote a lot of new scenes and then I spent every day, almost, at rehearsals for 4½ - 5 weeks, I think it was, doing the script changes every night. That was my involvement as a writer.

To what extent did you draw on research and/or your own experience when writing the play?

Well, actually, a lot of it is about my own life. The two lead male characters - CHARLIE CARDIFF and IAN SAMPSON - they're both me. One's the me I was when I wasn't working in the public service; and one's the me I was when I was working in the public service. Also, the sort of alienation that IAN feels when he comes back to Flat Creek Mission comes from my own experience..... not so much the alienation, I suppose, but the problems that I faced coming back to live in my community after knocking off work in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Victoria.

There we had only \$2.5 million a year to give out to 36 Aboriginal communities, and if someone in those communities if one of those people didn't get a slice of that cake (and I had to socialise with these people) then when they saw you, they wanted to talk work: why didn't they get the money and blah, blah, blah. It got to the point where I didn't actually want to go to the pub and socialise with them any more, or go to social functions, because all they did was basically want to talk work. It really peeves a lot of Aboriginal public servants because they can never really feel relaxed in their community. It's not talked about often, but it's very real.

Up the Road was written well before the recent debate on race in Australia. Has this debate had any impact on the play in this production?

Not really, I would say - to tell you the truth. The only visible impact that I see is that Neil wanted Pauline Hanson's head on a dart board in the play, and I said, "Well, that's cool". But, apart from that, not really, I don't think. I mean, the issues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face in *Up the Road* are still the same issues as now. None of those have been resolved, and they're not really the sorts of issues that can be resolved by white Australia or the debate on race, anyway - they're issues within our own communities. So, in that respect - and it's written for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, from their point of view - it's not really about Pauline Hanson.

This production of Up the Road appears to have been a very successful writer-director collaboration. How did you find working with a white director on the play?

There has to be a lot of give and take. A lot of Neil's suggestions were great because he's got that quite brilliant mind as a theatre director. But there were times where he would look at a line and say, "That's not funny", and I'd say, "Well, it's not supposed to be!" There was a lot of coming to understand each other and where we were coming from.

His imperative was that it be a funny, brilliant play - and that was mine, too, but without losing its "groundedness" - not at the expense of that. What I just said then about "it's not supposed to be funny" was basically the classic clash that we had - but usually the only clash that we had, because we've both got very similar political beliefs. The only issue was him misinterpreting some lines: you know, it's actually the character being sarcastic rather than funny. But, apart from that, it was a good collaboration.

Neil has told me that he really enjoyed working on *Up the Road*. As well, it was quite good for me to work with someone of Neil's stature - having never really worked at that level before, until the Playwrights' Conference. There I was dealing with one of the best directors in the country and I also had the best actors, (what I consider the best) Aboriginal actors in the country. And that taught me a lot - just working with those actors - because they know their craft so well. And they actually contributed a lot toward the script development, as well.

Your work has included writing for television. How is this process different to writing for theatre?

I suppose [the process of] writing for television is a lot more formula, you know:

.... Here's your first lot of money, here's your \$1,000. You've got two weeks to write the first draft, then we're going to meet and tell you what's wrong with it, and you're going to go away and take note of the changes that we made, put them all in your second draft, come back. Here's another \$1,000.

I found it much more like "working for the man, the boss", because it always has a set formula and you've got to fit into the formula. It's as simple as that - whether you like it or not. Whereas working on this play, it was much more collaborative, I was free to do and say whatever - it sounds like an old sixties song! but I was. That was really the major difference, I think. That's the way TV programming works, the way TV shows and series work: they have to have a formula. And that's why they can get different writers; they can use 20 different writers as long they all fit the same formula and the show goes on. In television the show is the main focus whereas, in theatre, it's actually the collaboration and the craft that is much more the focus. That's why you end up with a good play at the end of the day, I think.

Do you see playwrights in Australia at the moment as having a particular role or function in society?

Yes, I do. At the Playwrights' Conference in Canberra (where *Up the Road* was presented and workshopped) they had forums with those sorts of questions about the role of the playwright, the changing role of Australian theatre, etc. I said at the forum that people forget - as far as I'm concerned - that one of the strong starting points for theatre in Europe was the balladeer with his lute standing at the bottom of the castle, telling the townsfolk about what's going on in that castle. Shakespeare wrote the same things, he just didn't use a guitar! But he did tackle the same things.

That's where theatre started, in many ways, and the responsibility of the theatre person, be it a balladeer or a playwright is to tell the world what's going on in society. Whether you be gay, black, Italian, man or woman, that's not the issue. I just see it as important, that role of letting the world know about society's state of health. In much the same way that the guy with his guitar at the bottom of the castle did.

I don't think it's changed one iota. That's how Indigenous theatre in Australia started: the word "corroboree", that's all it was. It's maintaining the stories; telling the history and how we came to be around the camp fire; and the important things that must be remembered for the future. The corroboree is really analysing the situation in the same way as the guy with the guitar at the castle. So, in that way, I think it's universal.

And that's why *Up the Road* is universal: because my view of the world is that it's very universal - it's only the very people that we should be distrusting who are telling us that we're all so different. The Pauline Hansens, etc. If you believe them, they'd have us all in little boxes in the zoo, earmarked!

*What do you hope the audience will be thinking about as they leave the theatre after seeing **Up the Road**?*

Well, honestly, I just hope that *Up the Road* makes the world seem a little bit smaller for them - as it did for me when I finished writing it. I had revelations when I was writing it - I think most playwrights do when they finish writing about what's just come out of their mind and soul. So I just hope that the audience comes out thinking that the world's a little bit smaller; that they realise we have a lot more in common than we have differences from each other.

If we start relying on that as the strength to change the world then it would be a lot better place. That's what I hope.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR NEIL ARMFIELD

*How did the play, **Up the Road** come to your attention?*

I heard about it through the '95 Playwrights' Conference. You know, you get this buzz after the Conference. It often helps to not be there - just to listen to the buzz - and the buzz was attached to this play. I read it and the colours of the play were so bright that I wanted to do it. So we jumped in and John went with us very happily.

*What aspects of the play attracted you to direct **Up the Road**?*

I've started to answer that already! But more than anything - first of all - was its wit. Secondly - the fact that all of the characters were potentially terrific. They were all people that you would be interested to spend an evening with in the theatre.

Also, it was such a fresh bend on the theatrical expression of the Aboriginal experience. For instance, the idea of taking a bureaucrat who's lost contact with home; has been very successful in the white world; and then throwing him back into the Flat Creek world - that seemed to hold the potential for great comedy; and for a wonderfully deep and sad, fundamental experience. I loved the fact that it was a story about the reconciliation of the death of a brother - that was the heart of the story, and that's the play's secret, really. The audience works its way to the heart of the story through the normal layers and doors that life offers.

The other thing was the potential to explore something that I'm particularly interested in exploring as a director - and that is - just what theatrical story telling is and how to relax the theatrical experience for an audience and for actors. It seems to me that aboriginal actors are particularly able to do that: that's just what they have, what they carry, that's their stock in trade. I think it's actually a very special white actor that can just relax and do this kind of thing that I'm talking about. Basically, it's about keeping alive, on the one hand, the reality of the story they're telling, the character they're playing; and, on the other, the reality that they're in a theatre with hundreds of people watching them who are sharing that event. Keeping both of those realities alive and being able to play between the two is what I'm most interested in in the theatre.

Have you directed any other plays by or about Indigenous Australians?

Yes, a few. The first thing - which toured to Playbox actually - was *State of Shock*, a play by Tony Strachan. This was a play for a group of eight people, and it was the first example of doing this thing that we do in *Up the Road*: just setting it in a single room. Ernie Dingo played all of the characters - black and white. Looking back, it was a very early attempt.

For me the richest, earliest experience was doing Jack Davis's *No Sugar*, which started in Perth and went to Adelaide, around Tasmania and then ended up at Belvoir Street. This was where I first got a sense of this "heart of family life" which is fundamentally central to Aboriginal art and to Aboriginal culture. And I find that connection with family, of course, in my own life as well, but there is this incredibly singular connection that aboriginal families have straight through their bodies to the land, which has been such a privilege and such a rock to work with over the last ten years.

After that, I started trying to always have an Aboriginal actor or an aboriginal presence in every show that I did. It didn't always work out, but Jack Charles went into Chekhov's *The Government Inspector* that we did at Sydney Theatre Company; Barbara Henry went into *Uncle Vanya* that we did at the STC; and Olivia Miller was in *Diary of a Mad Man*. Then, when we formed the Company B, actors at Belvoir Street - such as Kevin Smith - did a number of roles. He is currently doing a number of roles for the company, in particular of course, Caliban in *The Tempest*, and the Grave Digger in *Hamlet*.

The next experience was doing *Dead Heart* (Nicholas Parson's play) which was then made into a film. But I think that, for me, *Up the Road* has been the fullest experience and the culmination of all that other work.

What preparation or research did you undertake to direct Up the Road?

You just use everything that you've got, really. I talked to John a lot and we worked on it as a play. We used John's experience in the black public service and in the particular town that was really the starting point for Flat Creek (or the image for Flat Creek). Really, though, it's just life experience.

How did you approach the play in rehearsal?

The thing I said on the first day of rehearsals was that I wanted to do a show in which - if someone in the audience sneezed, all of the cast would look at them and say "bless you". I wanted to have a very relaxed story telling that was nevertheless - or perhaps because of that relaxation - as deep a human experience as one could find.

Initially, we were interested in making a musical, but finally we decided to use the songs to provide a way of altering the texture of the show, rather than making it a “musical” per se. It also became a way of further breaking open the tyranny of narrative the walls that you’re bound by in telling a story and having characters. I tried to find any way I could of breaking that open.

What impact, if any, did the recent race debate in Australia have on the way you approached this production?

A lot. The Pauline Hansen stuff broke just before we started rehearsal. Actually, the white people in the cast were much more anxious about Pauline than the blacks. They (the blacks) tended to say “what’s new” and “at least she’s saying what she thinks”. But we thought that the best response would be a comic one, and so we decided to start the show with this Pauline Hansen “Dart Competition”. That idea came early in rehearsal - and it stuck!

What are the main themes you wish to highlight in your production of the play?

The enduring bond of love that encircles human beings and holds families together.

As Director, what role have you played in the development of the design for the play?

Well, you direct the design in the same way you direct the performance. You’re working with someone who uses all their skills and their intelligence to visually interpret a world for the play - in the same way that an actor uses all of his or her intelligence and sense of character and acting skills to interpret a character - and you just help to guide that. Brian Thomson and I had a shared starting point that the set should be a single world. One of the things that we did to the play was to remove a scene that was set in Canberra because we thought that the whole world of the play was much better confined to Flat Creek. I wanted a set that would be playful as well as very particular; one that also allowed the scene to generalise to a landscape at times - and that’s what we did.

INTERVIEW WITH DESIGNER BRIAN THOMSON

*What were your initial responses to the script of **Up the Road**, from the point of view of a designer?*

Well, because the script was pretty unfinished when I read it, and because I knew that this was a different style of writing, I knew that there'd be a lot of work done on it during the rehearsal process. So my main response was to make sure it was as open, flexible and "un-closed-off" as possible.

My initial response was that we should be doing the play as though this group of people had come to Belvoir Street and were simply telling us their story. So it just needed to be a place that felt like a home away from home, really. This was the idea behind it being, basically, a big kitchen.

It needed to feel like the hub of a home of an extended family.

Was there any specific research that was required for the design of the production?

I needed to find out what mission houses were like. I went through people at ATSI; and through a variety of different people. I found out the sort of things that people collected on the missions and what the kitchens were like.

A designer called Edie Kurzer was very helpful. She had designed a few things to do with missions so she had a lot of snapshots. She then put me onto some other people whom I phoned. I just asked these people to describe the sorts of kitchens they'd seen.

So, I just got a bit of an idea and then didn't really use any of it specifically, I just bore everything in mind.

Can you describe your collaboration with both the director and the costume designer in the development of the design?

Well, I've always worked very closely with Neil (Armfield, the director), so I just let him know that I was going to be doing something that was as open and free as possible. That meant he could take the play whichever way he wanted. I mean, I didn't really "collaborate" necessarily with the costume designer but she was working the same way: just collecting a lot of stuff, so that it could be a very free design process.

The director does become a sort of linking person between the set and costume designers. I've worked with Anna Borghesi, the costume designer, and Neil before so there's a lot of shorthand that goes on between us. Obviously, Anna and I discuss things but we don't get in each other's way, as it were. It's more a collaboration that occurs through respecting what we're both going to be doing.

How important was the decision to include interaction between actors, musicians and audience in the development of the set?

The main reason I actually got involved in the project was because Neil said he wanted to see whether the play would develop into a musical - and I was keen to work with Neil on a musical. It hasn't really turned into a musical, but it's got musical components which are very important parts of it. Again, it's really designed as though the musicians set up somewhere where they can oversee the whole thing.

The audience participation was an idea that really came from Neil during rehearsal. It's a constant desire of Neil's and mine (as designer) to make sure the audience feels really at home.

So that idea to involve the audience happened once the set design was already in place?

Oh, yes. The set was pretty much in place. But, because it was such a loose kind of idea those new ideas could be easily adapted to the set.

In fact, it turned out that the original thing I designed was all we ever needed. I don't think we added anything to it at all.

What about the "Pauline Hanson" dartboard? Was that part of the original set design?

Well, that wasn't actually my idea. That was just one of those things that came out of rehearsal. But the idea of having the Pauline Hanson dartboard..... She seems fairly irrelevant now but, at the time, everyone was talking about her and it seemed the right thing to do.

How would you describe the style of the set?

I just call it ... "Aussie Kitchen".

At Belvoir Street we always design a set around, basically, one corner of a particular space (the "Upstairs" theatre space at Belvoir Street in Sydney) and then decorate it with

scenic elements, actors, lights and sound. It's an essential part of the design process to always make that particular space work. Moving it to other venues therefore becomes a similar exercise. I mean, we're not trying to re-create Belvoir Street wherever we go - just that corner. In Melbourne we're including part of the audience within the actual set itself, so the audience feel that they're part of the set.

That was another reason why, in Belvoir Street, the colour continued right off stage into the audience..... I really wanted to embrace the audience, where possible, within the set.

What influenced your choices of colours and materials in the set design?

Well, the colour that I chose was something called "odeneil", which, for many, many years was thought to be the most soothing, friendly colour. I think that's just a rumour, but anyway, odeneil is the colour that we always relate to as being easy to deal with and pleasant to be around. It's as simple as that. And the other colours, the colours of the lino and the furniture and stuff just came from a need to find real pieces.

Did you participate at all in the rehearsal process and, if so, in what way?

I always go to rehearsals. I always try to check in, certainly - if not every day, then every couple of days - to find out what might have come up, what might have been needed. I don't spend a lot of time there but I normally try to arrive either before they start rehearsing or about lunchtime or towards the end of the day, just so that I can see a bit of what's going on and then I can find out from various people (the stage management or Neil and so on) what might have been required, what might have been changed.

Because I left it very open, if suddenly different things were needed, we weren't locked into anything..... there was no restraint on what could be added to it, or taken away. And, in fact, Neil just dealt with what he had I think he added a couple more chairs and that was about it.

I think this just had to be a very friendly space in which the play could take place, and where the characters could come to life. And, even though it seems to have been a very simple design solution, there's an art in being able to make those kinds of decisions. A lot of that comes from having respect for the people with whom I'm working. That's always terribly important.

Playwright on a mission

JOHN Harding had just graduated from university when a chauffeur-driven car arrived to take him to the airport.

He was whisked to Canberra, around the virtually all-white Department of Aboriginal Affairs and offered a job.

The sudden entree to a world of chauffeured cars and in-flight dining still amuses Harding. But on the plane home he contemplated what being a black bureaucrat might mean.

He imagined being caught in the middle — having to implement policies based on a white person's view of what was best for blacks. He scribbled a poem, *Fin-Stripe Blues*, on the brochure he'd been given about the department. He didn't take the job, but the poem became the genesis of his new play *Up the Road*, which opens at Sydney's Belvoir St next Tuesday.

"What hit me was that the policies were being written based on other people's ideas of what's best for black people... I thought it must be really hard [for blacks] to work in those positions and then go home and see the result of those policies."

The play centres around Ian, a black Canberra-based public servant who returns home after 10 years for the funeral of a relative. The play is set on a remote mission where he encounters his formidable Aunt Sissy, former girlfriend Sue and the well-meaning if patronising white field worker Greg.

While the idea for the play came years ago, Harding, 35, has drawn on his later experience working on government projects to create Ian.

"I dreaded going to the Koori community hotel because people would want to come up and talk to you about how their submission was going. 'Why did we get knocked back and so and so get it?', like I had a personal chequebook. I was just this lowly project officer. But you had to deal at the coalface with all the decisions others were making."

Greg is the butt of many of the jokes in this play and Harding acknowledges he has reservations about the role played by some white community workers

By JOYCE MORGAN

he has encountered. "I haven't met a whole lot of them that are working themselves out of a job."

The play is a comedy with an edge as a black family gets on with life; where everyday conflicts combine with those created by 200 years of white inhabitation. It is a window on black reality, he says.

"The best way often to deal with [problems] is humour. I think that's why Aboriginal people laugh a lot. It's disbelief."

It was the play's humour that attracted director Neil Armfield, whose production will transfer to the Perth Festival and to the Playbox in Melbourne next year. There's a freshness about Harding's wit and tenderness, says Armfield.

"I love John's ability to laugh at what's happening. It's like Cathy Freeman's response to Pauline Hanson: 'I'd tell her to shut up'. Sense of humour for all of us is the way we survive."

Armfield says the story of a black bureaucrat going home is very much a 90s tale.

"The men have maybe had the most confusing confrontation with white society, both in the bureaucratic political sense and also in workplaces and in the traditional male role of provider and protector."

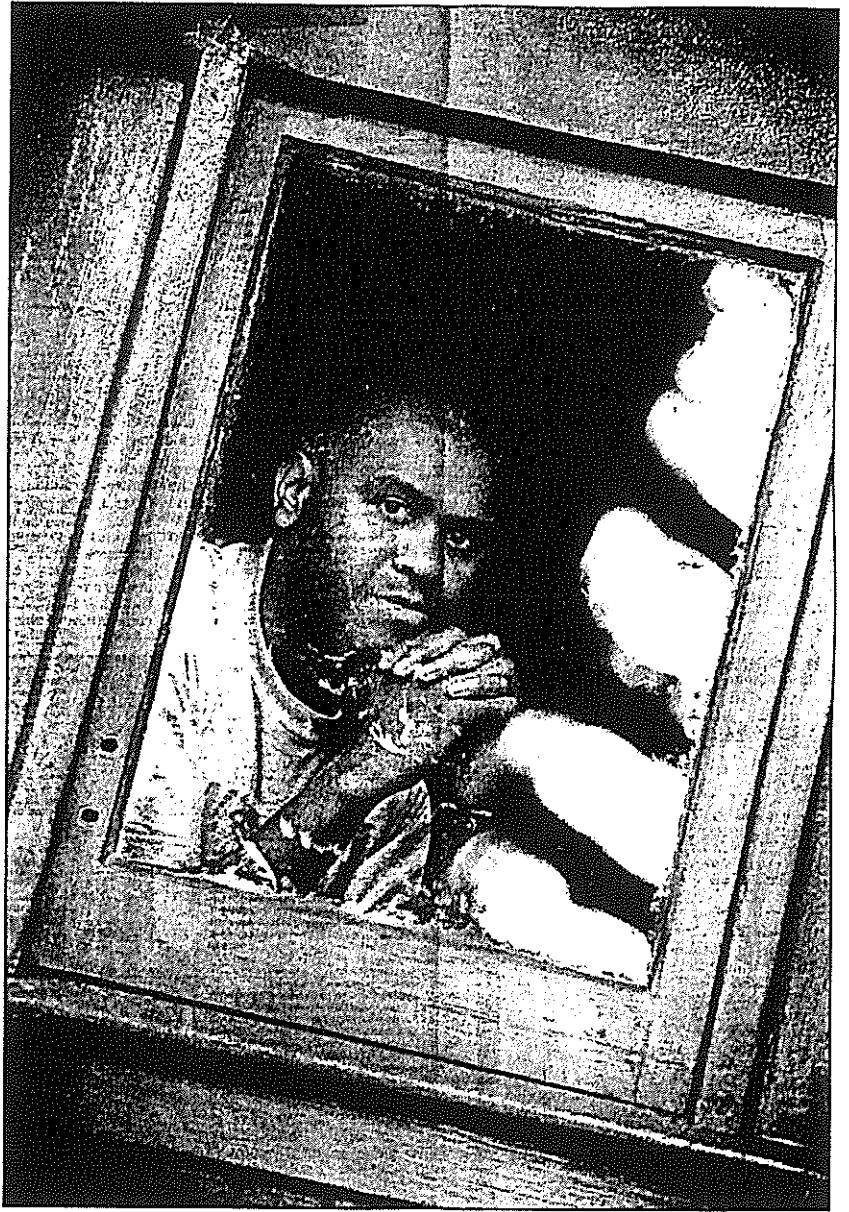
Certainly the women in the play are more centred and grounded than the men.

While the work is billed as a comedy, it's not all belly laughs. Armfield acknowledges being moved to tears during rehearsals. For him, the play's richness comes from the deep sense of security in the family and the power of family love.

"There's a deep connection to the land and to each other which European Australians can only sit and admire and learn from."

Harding wrote the play for a black audience. He penned a short version "out of necessity" in 1990 when he was involved in setting up an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre company in Melbourne.

"We thought we should create something of our own. So I created that."



Window to black reality: John Harding — Picture: NICK CUBBIN

Harding is working on a short film script and also wants to develop a play based on the Torres Strait Islands before the coming of Christianity. Born in the Torres Strait to Aboriginal and Islander parents, he says little is known of the distinct difference between the two cultures.

He also aims to write the first Aboriginal half-hour sitcom. A four-minute sitcom he has written, based on an urban black family, appears on SBS's weekly Aboriginal program *ICAM*, where he also works as a producer-presenter.

"We really need to humanise

our people again. I think the best way to do that is to show them as a family, how they struggle to exist above all the one-minute news grabs."

Up the Road opens at Sydney's Belvoir St on November 26; at the Perth Festival on Feb 19 and at Melbourne's Playbox on March 8.



Taking aim: John Harding (also inset) says Pauline Hanson has given new relevance to his 1991 play *Up The Road*. Picture: BOB BARKER

Making a point

THE audience arrives to see the actors on stage playing darts. Then as the people take in more of the scene, they realise there is something special about the dartboard — the target is a face of independent parliamentarian Pauline Hanson.

Playwright John Harding breaks into a big smile as he acknowledges the idea belongs to Neil Armfield, the director of his first play *Up the Road*.

"I wrote it 1991 and the whole Hanson phenomenon adds renewed relevance," Harding says. "I love the darts because they help break down the barrier between the audience and actors and this adds to making it more of a community event."

He is concerned about the feelings Hanson unleashed, describing them as "a frightening phenomenon".

"But Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander people knew about them all the time," Harding says.

"What Hanson has done is expose to Australia's white middle-class this fascist undercurrent that used to be practised on black people."

"Everyone knows there is a bunch of rednecks out there now." *Up the Road* is a big a breakthrough for the playwright, who

Playwright John

Harding finds

Pauline Hanson

frightening, writes

ROBIN USHER



has just been awarded a two-year fellowship from the Australia Council that will allow him to devote himself to writing — and to return to his home town, Melbourne, after two years working in Sydney.

The play is based partly on his own experience as an adviser to the Victorian minister for Aboriginal affairs in the 1980s.

But its aim is to break down the tendency to classify all groups together — whether white or black.

"White people always tend to do it to Aborigines — blacks this and blacks that, as if we were cattle or sheep," Harding says.

"Then blacks started to do the same with black public servants, calling them 'coconuts' — black on

the outside but white inside. I wrote the play to show black people can have different opinions about each other and about white society.

"We have to stop homogeneity taking over the black community. If we start de-humanising one another, how can we complain when it is done to us?"

U*p the Road* had a successful season in Melbourne in 1991 when it played at community venues in a production by the Ibbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative, co-founded by Harding. "It reached 3000 people in four weeks," he says. "It was quite a good season."

A re-worked version was presented at the Australian National Playwrights Conference in Canberra in 1995 where it was taken up by Neil Armfield for his Belvoir St theatre company in Sydney.

In the meantime, the election of Pauline Hanson as an independent in federal parliament made the play's themes more relevant than ever.

The playwright, at 36, is too self-confident to paint himself as a victim, though he admits attending Melbourne University was a lonely experience.

"I was the 12th Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to graduate. My sister was the 11th, and she was just finishing when I started.

"But that's changed now, of course. There are courses designed for black people."

He is looking forward to renewed contact with the university when he returns to Melbourne, as well as with the Ibbjerri theatre co-operative.

But mainly he wants to devote himself to writing a book of poems, film scripts and another play.

Up the Road is at the Malthouse from March 8-29. Book on 9685 5111.

HERALD SUN
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Playing fast and loose.

By RAYMOND GILL

JOHN HARDING'S new play, *Up The Road*, has been winning rave reviews around the country. Directed by Neil Armfield for Sydney's Company B Belvoir, the production has played in its home town and at the Festival of Perth, and opens at Playbox tomorrow night.

Its story of a yuppieified Aboriginal Affairs bureaucrat who returns to a mission settlement for a family funeral and finds himself in a comedic love triangle is loosely based on Harding's own experience. Using music, unbridled humor and one character who opens the play up to the audience by effectively telling them the stage directions, *Up The Road* can be seen as part of the emerging style of Aboriginal playwriting that uses a Western theatre tradition as its base.

But, like Jimmy Chi's *Corrugation Road* and *Bran Nue Dae*, Harding's play treats that tradition with casual flair.

Director Armfield, who began working with Harding on the play in August 1995, says there's a new generation of Aboriginal actors who have a freedom the previous generation did not.

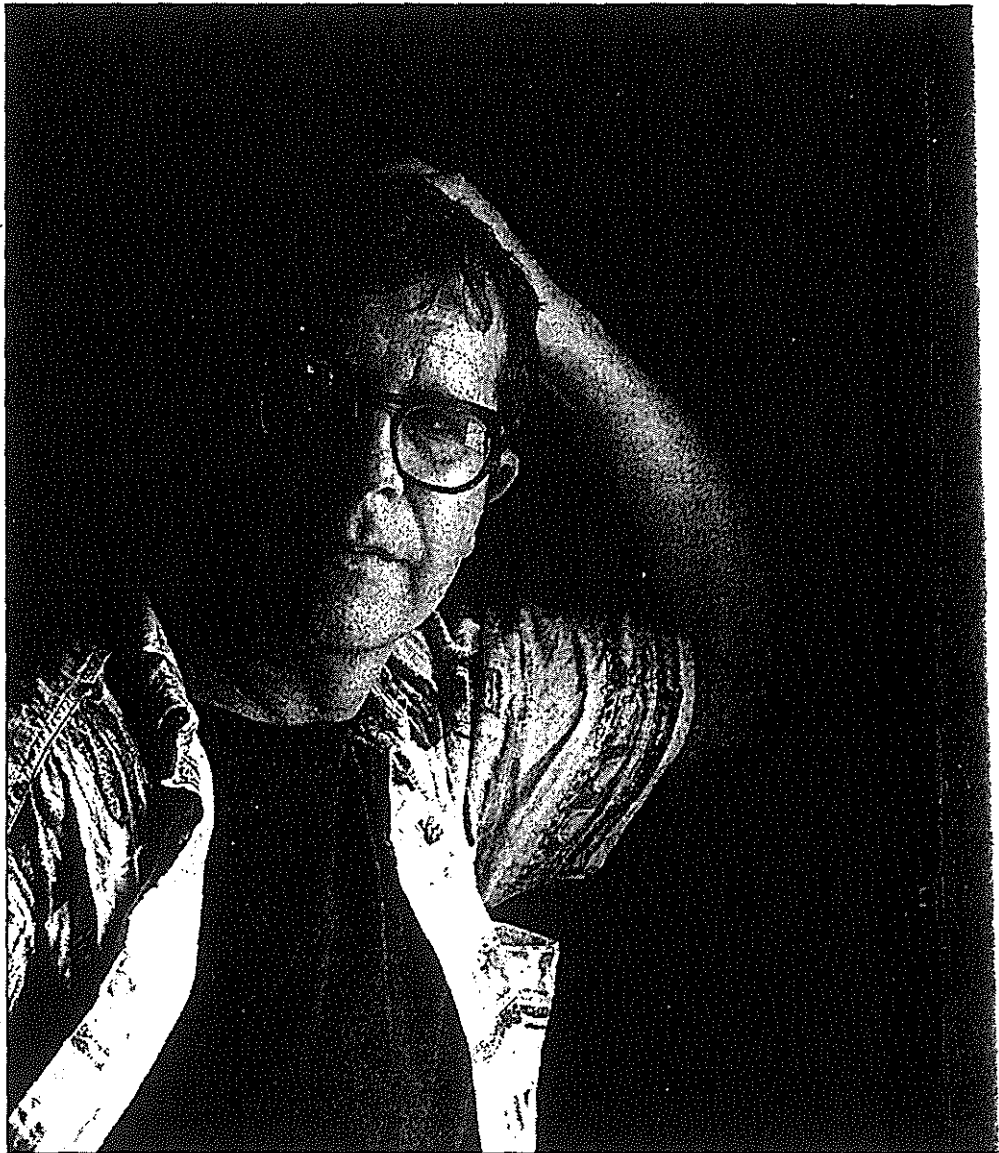
"When I've worked with (the previous generation) there was a strong sense that they have been through a tough struggle both personally and professionally to be taken seriously as legitimate performers.

"But this generation of actors — people like Bradley Byquar and Irma Woods (who both appear in *Up The Road*) don't have that kind of agenda. They are sick of only being considered "Aboriginal actors" and want to be considered able to do everything — but at the same time they are proud to belong to an indigenous tradition."

He says tradition allows Aboriginal actors a performance style that is highly conscious of the fact that they are not just playing to an audience, but that they and the audience are sharing in the telling of a story.

"I had always wanted to do a show that's comfortable enough in its relationship with the audience that if a member of the audience sneezes, a cast member can say 'God bless you'," says Armfield.

He says freedom comes naturally to Aboriginal actors and was a fundamental part of the rehearsal of the play when he and the cast of six (which also includes Paul Blackwell, Lillian Crombie, Margaret Harvey and John Moore), worked with Harding in fine-tuning the script. It was



then that they came up with the idea of the character played by Irma Woods reading out the stage directions to the audience.

Despite the group dynamic that helped form the finished product, Armfield says he never encourages a cast to improvise.

"To do it properly you need incredibly good character preparation and a special kind of actor. Mike Leigh knows how to do it, but it, too, easily turns into actors point-scoring and showing off." Armfield says the looseness of this play is actually "highly controlled".

"The language and silences in the play are finely crafted, and they just can't go adding stuff because it can ruin the rhythm."

Harding was working full-time as a reporter/producer for SBS television

while Armfield and the cast were rehearsing. He would arrive after work to find them brimming with suggestions about the script. "Some of them I flatly refused, others I took on board," says Harding.

One of them was a visual gag about Pauline Hanson. When the audience file into the theatre the cast are already on stage, some of them throwing darts at a picture of the controversial Queensland politician. Armfield says it was the white Australians in the production who were upset about Hanson's comments about Aborigines and migrants, and were eager for the play to address them.

Harding says his response to Hanson, like many Aborigines was low-key. "She's nothing new. We've been at the receiving end of Pauline Hansons for 200 years." M

Breaking down racial stereotypes

The return of an Aboriginal writer's play promises new provocative insights as
MICHAEL HARDEN reports

JOHN Harding is not particularly surprised at some of the reactions to the latest production of his play *Up The Road*. Originally performed in Melbourne in 1991 by the Ilbjerri Theatre Co-op (which Harding helped found), *Up The Road* has recently been performed in Sydney and Perth to appreciative crowds and positive reviews.

Running through much of the commentary about the play, however, is the astonishment that, given the problems faced by indigenous Australians, the play is still fuelled by optimism and humour. Harding is more resigned than incredulous.

"One of the main reasons for writing this play in the first place," he says, "was that I was sick of the homogenous attitude about blacks in this country. It was like all blacks are sad or all blacks are angry, like we are a flock of sheep with no opinions of our own. It is a dangerous thing and dehumanises races.

"What I wanted to show (in the play) was that Aboriginies have many opinions about deaths in custody and land rights and administrators. We don't all do things the same way."

Up The Road is "essentially a comedy" and tells the story of Ian, who, as a teenager, experiences the death of his older brother in the hands of the police.

Angry at the lack of revenge, Ian moves away from the mission where he grew up. In his twenties, he lands in Canberra where he becomes a bureaucrat, essentially turning his back on his people.

Years later, he reluctantly returns for the funeral of a blood relative and has to confront both the people he left behind and himself.

Though the play is not autobiographical, Harding says there are definitely elements that stem from his life.

Harding has worked in six different public service jobs (all in Victoria) and has experienced alienation from his people due to his "working with the enemy".

Aboriginal people, he says, can be distrustful of people working for the government and he



Forging links: John Harding of Ilbjerri Theatre

experienced the "conflicting agenda of serving two masters".

Up The Road has gone through some extensive changes since it first appeared in Melbourne. The new production, a collaboration with Sydney's Company B Belvoir has seen many of the scenes extended, changed and juggled around.

In addition to this chopping and changing, the new version of the play contains five songs, four of which Harding wrote. Harding wrote the songs to tunes that he had in his head and then got together with composer Wayne Freer, who put them on paper.

Harding believes that the music "adds another

spectrum to the play". He looked for points where it would fit in and not just be a meaningless interlude. To this end, he has used the songs to allow the characters to reveal what they are feeling at a particular point in the play. Harding believes that the songs help to further break the realist narrative of the play and bring the audience closer to the action.

But despite any changes, the core of the play and the issues it tables have not become any less relevant in the seven years since Harding penned *Up The Road*. In the current political climate with, as Harding says, "the Howard Government slashing ATSIC to bits and Pauline Hanson calling us all niggers again", plays that deal with Aboriginal issues from an Aboriginal perspective have become even more vital.

"To many non-Aboriginal people," says Harding, "issues like deaths in custody are no more than items on the news, lists of statistics. That (every) two minutes you hear about it on the news actually affects whole lives. It tears apart families and communities and people have to go on living with injustice in their hearts.

"What I wanted to do with the play was to humanise Aboriginals, show them getting on with it despite the injustice that we face."

Up The Road, which opens Playbox's 1997 season, also marks a collaboration with Playbox this year to "redress an area currently underdeveloped on the Australian main stage".

John Harding is pleased that *Up The Road* has helped this collaboration, although he has had nothing to do with the actual forging of links. He feels that it is part of "giving something back to the people that have looked after you all your life".

Currently in the first months of a two-year Australia Council Writer's Fellowship, Harding has already written a 70-minute radio drama, commissioned by the ABC, and is working on a 10-minute short film that is shortlisted for the second series of films by indigenous people that started with *From Sand To Celluloid*.

Harding believes that showing people what black Australians are all about through art is a valuable start to "the reflowering of the culture". John Harding is a man who practises what he preaches.

■ *Up The Road* is at The CUB Malthouse from March 8.

QUESTIONS: UP THE ROAD

- * The playwright, John Harding, describes times in rehearsal for UP THE ROAD when the director, Neil Armfield would look at a line and say "That's not funny", and John would reply "It's not meant to be!"
 - What for you were the funniest and the most serious moments in the play?
 - Do you believe the play works better as comedy or social commentary, or does it succeed as both?

- * The director, Neil Armfield, describes the death of IAN SAMPSON'S brother in custody as " the play's secret "
 - What do you think he means by this?
 - How is this event connected to the central action of UP THE ROAD?

- * John Harding says the play is "..not really about Pauline Hanson".
 - What sort of impact, if any, has seeing UP THE ROAD had on your own views on the race debate?
 - Do you agree with Neil Armfield that the best response to Pauline Hanson's views is a comic one?

- * Director Neil Armfield talks about "breaking down walls" between the actors and the audience.
 - What staging techniques does he use to achieve this?
 - How, as an audience member, did you respond to this approach?
 - How was this response different to that of other plays you have seen recently?

- * The original text of UP THE ROAD did not contain any songs.
 - Why do you think the director decided to include the songs?
 - What impact do the songs have on the style of the production?
 - Can you imagine the play without the songs? How would it be different?

- * The designer, Brian Thomson, describes the set as "..a very friendly space....where the characters could come to life.."
 - How effective do you believe the set to be in creating an environment for the play?
 - Does the space work equally well for all scenes?

WRITING A REVIEW

The following questions may assist you in formulating a critical response for writing your review:

- Did I enjoy the experience?
- Would I recommend it to others?
- Did the play have a message and was it clear, muddled or hidden?
- What questions were asked and what answers offered?
- Was the piece designed to inform, entertain or both?
- Was there a major theme or series of themes?
- Were there unexpected twists in the plot?
- What was the mood of the piece?
- Was the use of language economic or extensive?
- Were the cast organised as a strong ensemble or was individualism in evidence?
- Did characters show evidence of research or consideration of fine detail?
- How strong was your empathy with particular characters - how strongly did you care for or about them and what happened to them?
- Did all actors make a strong offering to the audience and to other actors?
- Did the designer achieve the plays intentions?
- How practical were the sets and costumes?
- Was lighting and sound integrated or intrusive?
- Could everything be clearly seen and heard?
- Was there evidence of successful designer/director/technical collaboration?

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