

YANAGAI! YANAGAI!



ANDREA JAMES

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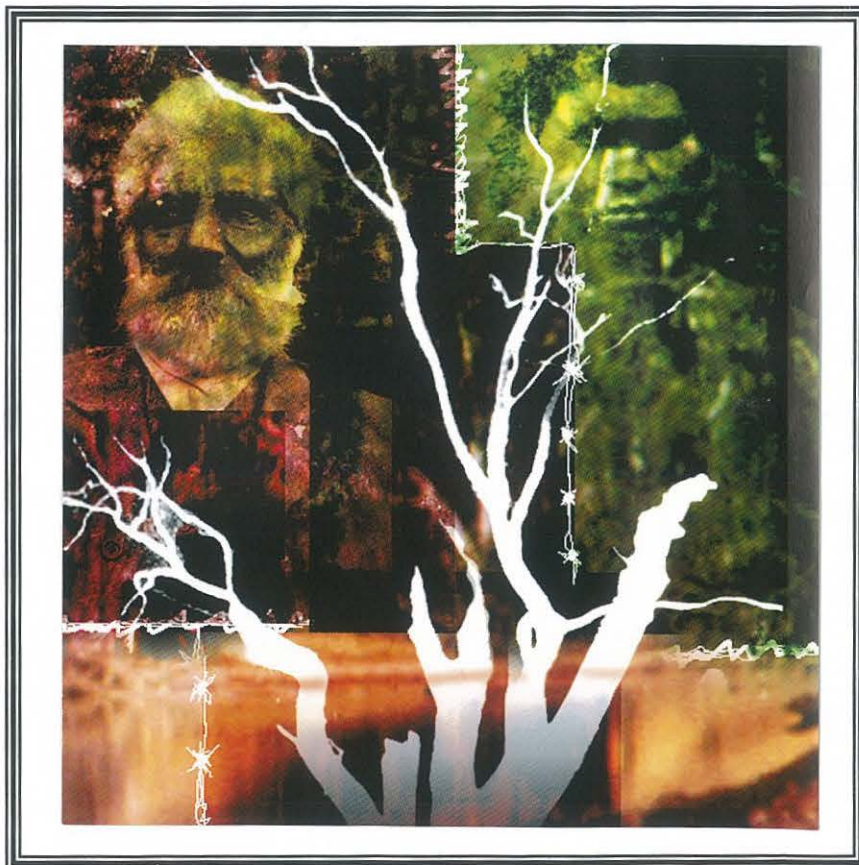
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*Playbox Theatre Company in collaboration with
Melbourne Workers Theatre
present:*

Yanagai! Yanagai!

by Andrea James

BACKGROUND NOTES



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Yanagai! Yanagai!

by Andrea James

... We are in a mythical landscape on the banks of a mighty river. The Yorta Yorta know him as 'Dungula'. The white fellas call it 'The Murray'...

Background Notes

Playbox Education, in collaboration with Melbourne Workers Theatre and the cast of *Yanagai! Yanagai!*, have prepared these Background Notes to assist students in their study of the play. They are not a document that provides a definitive statement about *Yanagai! Yanagai!* While we see it as important for students to respond to theatre in order to address the demands of VCE, we also want students to discuss their own experiences and understanding of *Yanagai! Yanagai!* We hope that students will voice their own opinions about the play, its style, its characters, its story, its stagecraft, and the themes and ideas that they believe a contemporary Australian play such as this one explores, and to discuss its relevance to their lives and their future.

Playbox Education and Melbourne Workers Theatre gratefully acknowledge Dr. Wayne Atkinson, Yorta Yorta Elder, for his generous assistance and considerable contribution to these Background Notes.

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Summary of Yorta Yorta Struggle for Land Justice

- Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim was driven by the historic Mabo decision, 1992, which abolished the legal fiction of terra nullius (meaning land belonging to none). Mabo found that Indigenous title to land in Australia existed, particularly where it could be demonstrated that it continued on the basis of prior occupation and connections.
- With the success of the Mabo decision and the introduction of the Native Title Act 1993, the Yorta Yorta were one of the first Indigenous groups on mainland Australia to lodge a native title claim on the basis of their prior rights to land and water within their traditional territories.
- Yorta Yorta struggle for land justice that culminated in the Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim has its roots in the original conflict and violence that took place over the ownership and control of land and resources at colonisation.
- The evidence presented in the Yorta Yorta case demonstrated that the Yorta Yorta struggle for land justice has been a continuing process, and the current claim is in fact the 18th attempt to settle the long-standing dispute.
- The decision of Justice Olney in the Yorta Yorta case was based on an Anglo centric and narrow-minded interpretation of Yorta Yorta connections with the claim area. It relied on the culturally biased observations of the first white intruders into Yorta Yorta lands at the exclusion of the majority of oral evidence (54% of the court transcript) presented by the Yorta Yorta.
- The Yorta Yorta struggle for land justice before and after *Mabo*, 1992 highlights the long and enduring nature of the native title claims process and exposes the failure of the Anglo legal system to deliver land justice to our people.
- The Federal and High Court decisions on the Yorta Yorta Claim will not deter our people in the ongoing struggle for what we believe is ours by inherent right. 'Always was and always will be Yorta Yorta land' is the reality of Yorta Yorta identity and survival as a distinct cultural group within Australian society. Justice must prevail in the long run.

Dr Wayne Atkinson - Principal Yorta Yorta claimant
September 2003

Defining the Concept of an Aboriginal Elder.

Defining the status of an Indigenous elder is drawn from my cultural knowledge of what constitutes an elder in the community and from the elder status that has been bestowed upon me as a Yorta Yorta person. The definition is not conclusive. Its purpose is to provide knowledge on the key questions of an elder. These are:

1. What is an elder?
2. What are the requirements of becoming an elder in Aboriginal society today?
3. What are the main roles and functions of an elder?

The definition of an Aboriginal elder today is a combination of cultural factors. They are earned rather than given and they are related to one's maturity in life. Eldership status is about something that is gained through life experience and the observance of appropriate cultural protocols rather than hereditary bestowal.

Status of Elder-Age

The status of elder is bestowed on a person when they reach a more senior level in life, which varies but is generally accepted to be in the middle and more mature ages. The Aboriginal Community Elders Services Association for example regard an elder as a person who has 'reached the age of 50 and is accepted as an elder by members of the Association'. It is also common for the status of elder to be acknowledged by younger members of the community by calling someone Uncle or Aunty when the appropriate degree of seniority has been reached. This is a matter of respect and it is often applied to those outside one's own family kinship group (pers com Fay Carter Chief Executive Officer of ACES, 28 July, 1998).

Cultural Factors:

An elder is someone who is regarded as such by his or her standing in the community. They gain respect from the accumulation of cultural knowledge, wisdom and attributes that have been handed down by their forebears and from those qualities that have been acquired through learned experience. The accumulation of these attributes can be likened to what is often referred to as doing your apprenticeship and establishing your credibility within the community. Other qualities such as leadership, cultural integrity and trust within the community are necessary ingredients.

Responsibilities of Elder in Aboriginal Community:

On a community level elders are people who the community and individuals can trust, particularly when there is a need for advice on personal and cultural matters or to seek wisdom from their experiences. Elders who have accumulated cultural knowledge are often relied on as the appropriate authorities on cultural matters. They are consulted on land and cultural issues, and are regarded as important sources of knowledge on customary law matters including Government policies and practices. Many elders are chosen to sit on the various committees that represent land and cultural matters. A good example is the current management structures of the Museum of Victoria and the Native Title Representative Body, Victoria.

The Yorta Yorta Nations Inc have a 'Council of Elders which is the ultimate decision making authority. A further example is section (e) of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act, 1984 Part 11A, Victoria, which recognises the 'need to accord appropriate status to Aboriginal elders and communities in their role of protecting the continuity of the culture and heritage of the Aboriginal people'.

Example of activities of elder in the community

- Advise organisations, individuals and students on cultural matters.
- Participate in community activities and maintain family kinship obligations including tending to cultural protocols associated with death, reburial and mourning.
- Attend cultural camps for youth and elders and assist with organising cultural activities such as the National Aborigines Day Observance Week (NAIDOC).
- Represent family and in land and heritage matters.
- Officiate in ceremonies organised by Aboriginal organisations and act as a mediator in settling disputes when required.
- Teach young people about their history and assist those seeking to find their family links.
- Maintain connections with country and rights to use and enjoy land as ancestors did.
- Visit communities in Victoria and Interstate when requested to talk about common social, political and cultural concerns.
- Assist communities in the teaching and recording of oral knowledge passed down from elders.
- Officiate in welcoming people to country under cultural protocols.

ROLE OF ELDER FROM YORTA YORTA NATIVE TITLE CASE-MAY 1999

Evidence was given that the Yorta Yorta has a traditional based authority structure centred upon the role of members recognised as elders of the community. Many witnesses gave evidence of the role of elders in the ongoing life of the Yorta Yorta - see evidence of Margaret Wirrpunda exhibit A8.14 para 13 and t.5768; Kenneth Briggs exhibit 8.11 para 15.

The evidence was that elders are not elected by ballot or chosen in a formal manner. Rather they are senior men and women generally recognised by the members of the community as the custodians of the traditions and heritage of the community, and as people having special authority among them. The evidence was that the role of the elders derives from the traditional laws and customs of the community, and influences the connection that members of the community have with the subject land and waters (for example, in educating younger members of the community in the use of the land and waters and of their responsibilities and rights in respect of it - see for example, the statement of Hilda Stewart exhibit A8.2 paras 6, 7, 10 and evidence of May Andy t.2480-2488). It was submitted to His Honour that the presence and role of elders in the Yorta Yorta community was evidence that the appellant community are living under, or acknowledge and observe, traditional laws and customs. Justice Olney made no finding in respect of this submission. Nor did he reject the evidence upon which it was based.

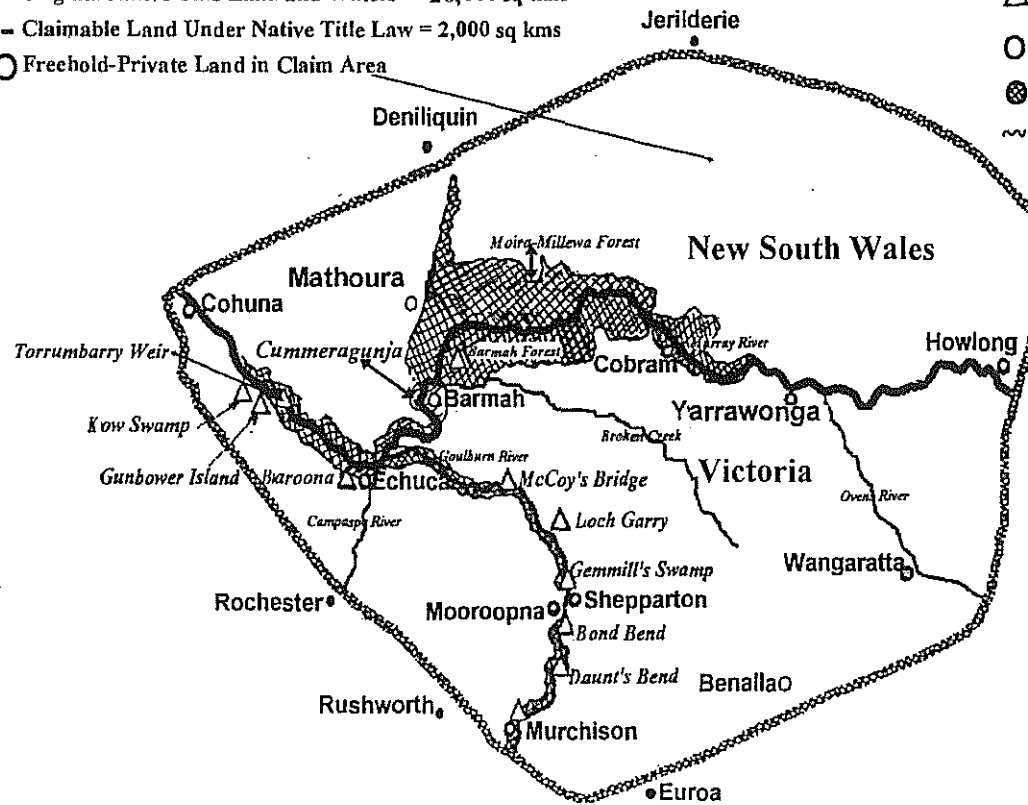
Dr Wayne Atkinson
4 September, 2003

Figure: 2

Native Title Land Being Claimed In Traditional Yorta Yorta Territory

- Original Native Title Land and Waters = 20,000 sq kms
- Claimable Land Under Native Title Law = 2,000 sq kms
- Freehold-Private Land in Claim Area

- △ Sites Visited 1996-97
- Main Residential Centres
- ⊗ Main Claim Area
- ~ Rivers



Wayne Atkinson 2000

Map of Traditional Yorta Yorta Territory

INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA JAMES, PLAYWRIGHT & DIRECTOR OF 'YANAGAI! YANAGAI!'

Andrea, what was your initial inspiration for writing 'Yanagai! Yanagai!'?

Well, the Yorta Yorta land claim was my main inspiration. Also, when I was talking with Wayne Atkinson (a Yorta Yorta elder) during the claim, I could see how he was being affected by the land claim process and in particular what was happening to him in court. There was all this stuff out at the time (when Mabo was passed in the High Court) about the Ten Point Plan and there was a suggestion in the media that Aboriginal people were out to try and take people's back yards away. And yet what I could see from the Yorta Yorta perspective was that it is not actually an easy process at all to make a land claim; in fact the process of Native Title is really harrowing for Aboriginal people. I was also driven by the recent Federal Court judgement made by Justice Olney who said that the Yorta Yorta people had "no traditional connection to the land". That to me was an attack on our culture. I wanted to make something new to show - well this is our culture...

What does 'Yanagai! Yanagai!' mean and why did you choose this particular phrase for the title of your play?

Yanagai! Yanagai! is a Yorta Yorta war cry meaning 'Go away! Go away!' I chose this particular title because these were the first words uttered by the Yorta Yorta to white men as recorded in Edward Curr's journal.

Why did you think that theatre would be a good vehicle to tell this story?

Well, I didn't think that the mainstream media was covering our perspective very well at all. I also felt that through theatre you can project emotion and I guess what I've always wanted to do with this play is to try and have people understand and feel what it's like to have such a sense of loss and how difficult it is to connect with our land when there are so many invasive forces all around. I want to do that in a way where we're not brow beating, but really just saying, "Come and witness our experience for an hour and a half". Ultimately I want people to feel with us what it's like to both love our land and not to have it as accessible to us as we'd like.

The other thing about the theatre is that we can actually speak our language. A big part of this play is the speaking of Yorta Yorta language which is an incredibly rare event; I can't think of many other places where we can speak our language publicly like this. That's one of the most exciting parts about the play, I reckon - we're all getting together and speaking our language into space again. It's not just in a book. And theatre's perfect for that.

What sort of research or preparation did you need to do before writing the play?

I did a lot of research and I talked to as many elders and other Yorta Yorta people from different generations as I could. I read a lot of material; I read all of the court transcripts from the Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim.

I also spoke a lot to Uncle Wayne Atkinson who had compiled a lot of oral histories from Yorta Yorta people. Uncle Wayne is a key elder in the Yorta Yorta community and one of the instigators of the Native Title Claim. In fact I think if Uncle Wayne wasn't around, we probably wouldn't have gone in for the claim. So he's a pretty important person in the Yorta Yorta community and in my family as well. He's like my second dad. As part of my research, I also went up to the Cummeragunja Reserve and did some workshops with the kids up there. Throughout the research process, I had to get permission from the elders in terms of where I could go and how far I could go with the material that I wanted to explore. So it was a pretty extensive process.

The whole process of the Native Title Claim and the court case sounds like it was pretty heavy and traumatic for the people involved, but your play has a lot of humour and hope. Can you talk about balancing those aspects?

I think it's really important. I don't think you could write or try to represent anything to do with the Yorta Yorta without having both of those aspects, because really it's the humour and hope that has got us through eighteen different claims and helped us to keep surviving against the odds. Coming together and laughing together is really important. With the land claim, there was a lot of cheekiness and a lot of laughter around. Us looking at the opposition and kind of laughing about them; elders getting up and singing in court - there were some really lovely light moments in amongst all of the traumatic ones.

You have one white actor in the play who gets to play various roles - can you talk about his function in the play?

Yes, David Adamson is the actor playing all the white characters. I've had to be really careful because there is a tendency to want to scape goat somebody on stage so they become the "baddie". With the character of Curr, I've tried to make him symbolic of a lot of things. It's not an historical representation of that character. I'm trying to treat him as a kind of representation of the state of the nation at the moment, with our current government. The white characters in the court on the other hand are very functional.

David's role has been very interesting and he has been very aware of that. He's like an outsider within the play and in many ways he's an outsider in the rehearsal process because a lot of the stuff we've been doing is getting together as an ensemble, working on the chorus and so on. With the rehearsal schedule, he often comes in later in the day, which is a bit like what happened historically! It's been really interesting watching that happening. But David's been great - he approaches it in a really generous way.

Do you believe there are reconciliatory aspects of the play as well or was that not the intention?

I think there is some sort of reconciliation drive, but it definitely wasn't the focus and reason for me writing the play. Really it was for Yorta Yorta artists to get together and empower ourselves with culture again after such a devastating blow in the court - that was the driving force. But when people come, of course, I'm hoping it will reconcile some things. We're hoping to take the show up to the Yorta Yorta land and see what happens when people receive this kind of performance; what impact it might have on the community up there. There's definitely scope for reconciliation to happen.

Exactly where is the Yorta Yorta Land?

It's right up in northern Victoria, straddling both sides of the border on the Murray River around Echuca, all the way up to Deniliquin, and then down as far as Shepparton and Benalla. So it's quite a big area of land but the core of it is around the river and lake systems. Lake Barmah is an important place up there too.

Have you had any dramaturgical input to the writing process?

I've had a lot of dramaturgical input and it's been a really important process. I don't think I would have gone into the places I have without someone poking me and urging me along. I've had a dramaturg - Patricia Cornelius - pretty much from the first stage of actually writing the play after researching. I wrote the first draft and she has travelled along with me through all the following drafts; in fact she's in the rehearsal room now just keeping a check on the text! But I'm pretty happy with where the text is at, and I think that is reflected by how much dramaturgical work it's had, which has been a really important part of the process.

What has been the nature of that input?

It varies, but mostly Patricia has been acting as a support and responding to the scenes and the material that I send her; asking me questions and prodding me this way and that, getting me to go in deep with things.

I can tend to find something and then flit across it, but Patricia would say no, you can really go into that moment much more. She has also helped with the structure of the play; how to piece the scenes together. Over quite an extended period of time we'd work in intense bursts together for about a week and then I'd go away and write for about a month or two, and then come back. That's pretty much how we've been working. It's been quite a slow process, but it has been good to have that period of time where both of us have been connected with the development of the play, and following it through to performance has been great.

To what extent have the cast contributed to the development of the play?

They've been vital to the process. I've been really lucky in that all of the cast (except for Lisa Maza) have been involved in at least two of the development stages. Also, throughout that dramaturgical process, a really important part has been doing readings and getting responses from audiences, because I didn't really know if the play was working or not. The performers have been vital in feeding that process and it's because they have Yorta Yorta heritage as well that they have informed the work so much, as has David as well. It has been fantastic to have the cast follow the work in its various stages and finally bring it to performance. It has made the work so much easier because they're already connected to the material, the characters and the rhythm that we set in the readings.

How have you found the process of directing your own play, and what are the benefits and challenges of this particular process?

It has been really interesting actually, because originally I thought it was going to be difficult and I might be too fixed on certain things. But I've actually found it incredibly enjoyable and I think that is because I know the material so well. I haven't had to do the sort of preparation as a director that I would do if I was working on somebody else's work; trying to understand the symbols and the rhythm and the flow of the scenes. I already know all of that and so I've been able to be really relaxed about it. I've also been able to let go of things that I've written and give the cast a sense of ownership of the play, which is essentially theirs now – they are the ones who have to perform it. So it has been surprisingly enjoyable and straight forward. I was surprised because people did say "Oh you need to be careful, you need to get your head out of it sometimes", but it hasn't been a problem thus far.

What are the particular themes you wanted to highlight in your production?

Well, I guess, a sense of the many layers of grief and sorrow that we feel that are almost indescribable; I wanted to have a sense of those permeating every scene.

No matter what is happening, there is always this sense of grief and loss that is so deep that you can't see the bottom, which layers everything. But at the same time, there is also this incredible determination and will to survive against the odds. They are the two things I think that are running along through the play -there is always that sense of grief and loss, but at the same time we keep moving forward as a people.

Another thing that is really subtly played out - it's not described or really talked about in the play - is that sense of devastation and destruction of the land and what is happening to our river. It's a sort of sub-theme I think, that is reflected in the design of the play.

I don't think you can talk about our land without talking about what's happening to the river, which is sort of like our lifeline. So that weaves through the play as well. The ultimate thing in the end is that, despite what Judge Olney said, we've survived and we do have a culture and it is strong and look, here it is.

How would you describe the style of the play?

I've thought about this a lot and I think it's a mixture of things. For me, there are three varying styles. There are the scenes with Uncle and Lyall that are quite naturalistic and then there are also the more mythical scenes that are in Munarra's world, touching on surrealism when Curr and Munarra finally meet. Those scenes become quite surreal and symbolic. Finally, there is some chorus work that steps out of the play as well. All of these three things interweave and that was a fairly conscious decision.

With the Yorta Yorta, you can't just use one style, because there are so many different ways of looking at our culture and our people and you need different styles to express the different levels. There are the dreaming creation stories that are incredibly alive, but fictional. Then there are the very real emotional worlds and stories of real people that need a more naturalistic style. And finally, there is the chorus work where all our mob comes together to comment on what's happened.

You're using song and movement and puppetry and people as animals and all sorts of things... It is quite an eclectic mix.

Yes, it is and I think it works okay to flit across the different worlds. To me there's a natural world, a real world that's in real time, and then there's another world that's in the dreaming. It's not on the earth, it's somewhere else. The different styles help to establish those different places.

Can you talk about your involvement in the design process for the play?

That has been really interesting. We took the designers up onto the land which was vital. You couldn't design this play without getting a sense of what this place is like. We went up the river and Uncle Wayne came with us and he told us all the stories, and we went out on the lake and listened to the sounds. The sound designers got to go out and tape actual sounds from the land and Adrienne Chisholm, the set and costume designer, really got a sense of the colours and textures of the land. That was one of the first steps.

Then Adrienne and I worked really carefully together, meeting over quite an extended period of time until we came up with a basic map for the design. We decided we wanted to work more symbolically using shapes rather than trying to realistically represent the land; to get that essence of the land rather than trying to make it a real representation. So that has been a good process.

Yorta Yorta artists have been involved in all aspects of the design process. Visual artist Trinna Hann has been assisting Adrienne to come up with Yorta

Yorta designs for the costumes and composer Lou Bennett has worked with the band, *The Crazy Bald Heads*, in coming up with the music. So the Yorta Yorta have influenced all of those areas really, really strongly.

What about the particular challenge of creating a sense of the river onstage?

That was an interesting one. The option that we went for in the end was to go from Munarra's creation, which was the drawing of a line in the sand; a simple line that's curved on the floor. The curve had to be very specific – it couldn't be just a slight curve – it had to be a curve that really represented the river. At certain times that line in the sand will be highlighted and then at others, the river will just be represented quite broadly with light and sound.

What you'd like the audience to be thinking about as they leave the theatre?

I suppose I'd like them to be thinking "What next?" really. There are still two opposing forces on the land and ultimately that has got to be resolved. This loss in court is not going to mean we say "Oh well, let's just all go back to where we were before and not bother about it any more." I think I'd like the audience to think - is that okay that the Yorta Yorta failed with their claim in the High Court, and that we're not going to get access to our land legally. There are all sorts of things that audiences can do and lobby for. Uncle Wayne often says, "Okay, we failed in court using legal means; now we've got to establish a people's movement" - much like what happened with the referendum. We need to say well, at least the Barmah Forest needs to become a national park; at least we need to have a place that is not only a place for us but for everybody. So that's where the campaign is going now and I think after this play I'd like people to be involved in that, and supporting it. "Where to from here?"

INTERVIEW WITH LOU BENNETT, PERFORMER & COMPOSER FOR *YANAGAI! YANAGAI!*

What has been your role as performer and composer in the development of 'Yanagai! Yanagai!' as a piece of theatre?

I've pretty much been working with Andrea since the beginning. She came to me quite a few years ago and presented me with a letter and said, "I've got this project that I'd like to get up and running and I'd like your input." Eventually the correspondence grew over time. Basically what was involved was just keeping in touch with Andrea, thinking about the characters and about what she wanted to bring out in the story line. I had to think about it in two separate forms, as an actor and also as a composer, to try and create the music throughout that process. The music did take four years to write, to get it up and running, to actually get my teeth stuck into it.

Have the two roles of actor and composer been quite separate for you, or have there been times when thinking about one of the characters you've been playing has influenced the music you've written?

I think there have been two separate occasions where I have really had to set aside the music and work specifically on the characters, and vice versa. But then there have been threads that have linked those two together. I play five characters in the play, so there are a wide variety of different themes and emotions that come through those characters. To have that experience of working on the characters has definitely helped me write the music, and to bring it from a place where it comes from the characters' emotions. The feelings of loss and sadness and pain; the feelings of hope and faith that one day the tables will turn - those are the sorts of thematic things that came out as I started to write the music.

Have you created particular songs or a score for the play? How has the music developed?

I've written four separate pieces of music for *Yanagai! Yanagai!* The people who I have collaborated with are two dear friends of mine, Tim Prince and Pete Lawler, who make up half of the band, The Crazy Baldheads. I've worked alongside them for quite a few years and we work well together; we can bring out a lot of the goodness and the creativity in each other. So we've all made a contribution to those pieces of music. I brought four of the pieces to the boys and the boys wrote one piece and then we all collaborated on the five pieces together.

Will any of those pieces of music be played live on stage or are they all pre-recorded?

They're all pre-recorded and they'll be interwoven into the sound design with the work of David Franzke, the sound designer. We basically brought the five

pieces in their entirety to David and Andrea, and they've listened to them and now (in week three of rehearsal) we're in the process of placing pieces of music in the appropriate places in the play. There is only one piece that really is quite thematically connected to a particular character and that's the Sir Edward Curr piece, which very much belongs to him... you know when you hear this piece, you see this character.

With the other pieces of music; they're more about emotions that are stirred. One is called *The River is Made* which is a piece that will open the second scene. There is another piece called *Uncle's Tune* or *Old Man's Tune*, which is a searching tune for when Uncle is looking for the tree and searching for contentment and acceptance. Another piece is called *She is Watching*, which was inspired by my grandmother, and the notion that she is always watching me, along with my great grandmothers and the rest of them that look after me. And the last piece is *The Love I Have* which is a piece that I wrote about being Aboriginal; being Australian and Aboriginal, and knowing that no-one can take that away; that will always be. That's also another part of Uncle's dreaming, that no matter what the courts say, no matter what judgements are handed down by judges, we know in our hearts that no one can take our land away from us.

Lou, you yourself are a Yorta Yorta woman. Has that been pretty crucial to the development process, that most of the people involved have had that shared history?

Definitely. Myself, Andrea, and actors Tony Briggs and Bryan Andy are all Yorta Yorta. Then we have our dear friend Lisa Maza who is a Murray Island girl, still from an indigenous culture, and non-Indigenous actor David Adamson who is working on side with us to create the character of Curr. And the cow. Mustn't forget the cow!

Could you talk about some of the different characters that you play in "Yanagail Yanagail"?

Well one of the main characters that I have been working very hard on at the moment is one of the dingoes. I play the female dingo and Bryan plays the male dingo. That character represents a lot for me. The two dingoes are guardians of Munarra, but they're not only her guardians, they're representative of the guardians that we believe follow you around. Everyone has guardians, a masculine and a feminine.

In our culture we call them Mimi spirits, and they have a very mythical, comical and protective character to them. They're funny, they're scared, they're very protective and they know the job that they have to do. Sometimes they do it well, sometimes they don't, and that helps to bring out the humour in our culture and also the tragedy.

The other characters I play include a six year old girl called Mae, who is Albert's sister. Albert is played by two different men. Tony plays the older Albert and Bryan plays the younger. Mae is a little girl who loves the bush,

who has grown up there and who knows that she has to get across the river, away from the black cars that come to take the kids away. She's a real symbol of innocence and what our culture has meant to us as far as the young people are concerned. She's also a symbol of hope as well, which sometimes gets lost within all of the sadness.

Then there's Leslie. Leslie's a real card; he's a natural comic. He likes to be cheeky and is also a warrior; he goes from one to the other. This is a really different experience for me to be playing a man. I've never dressed in drag before in my life, but I'm actually playing a male character! So that's another really interesting concept to have a go at. Lola is a sixty to seventy year old woman who is the knowledge base. She knows what she's talking about. She knows every single in and out of reserve life and family life on Cumberagunja Mission. She's the strong backbone of our culture; strong, but not aggressive and very kind hearted – that's Auntie Lola.

The last character that I play is one of the story tellers. I play Story Teller Number Two. There are four story tellers, and between us we create one voice. That's another integral part about our culture - we can't live without each other. It's not a hierarchy, symbolised by a triangle; our culture is symbolised by a circle in that in some way we all speak for each other and support each other. At the same time we respect difference and diversity as well as similarity.

So you're playing a huge range of characters there, from the story teller who is part of a kind of chorus, to a man, an old woman a little girl and a dingo! As an actor, how do you prepare for all those very diverse roles when you're working in rehearsal? What do you do to create the distinct characters?

Taking direction is a very difficult thing to do sometimes, but I think if you're able to take direction, you're going to become a good actor. Whether it's good direction or bad direction, if you can take it on the chin and absorb it, that's certainly going to help you with the process of developing your characters. I've gone in thinking, I'll take as much direction as I can. I will still give my opinion and suggestions, but I will always refer back to Andrea as the director who has the last say. I'm happy with that because she has the knowledge to do that. I'm still a young actor. This is only my third professional production, though I've been on stage for fourteen or fifteen years of my life as a musician. It's a little bit more intense being an actor and playing a character. You have it a bit easier when you're a musician. You can choose whatever character you want to be on stage; you're the director and the actor at the same time.

Really focusing and keeping my life as simple as I can also helps with working in rehearsal. When I step through the doors of the Bagging Room (our rehearsal space), I focus only on the task at hand for that day, for that hour; turning off all phones, getting rid of all the stuff that I've left at the door, whether it's personal business or anything else. It's really important to focus.

The dingo must be one of your most challenging characters. How have you worked with Andrea as director to create the character of the dingo?

I think I've been extremely lucky to be part of this play from its inception, so I've known about all the characters for quite a while and that has been an advantage. I think one of the main things is to really explore every avenue that you possibly can. Look at your character and isolate that character. Ask that character questions. What kind of things does that character do, in terms of movement and emotion; what are their fears and their strengths? Cover all those bases. That might mean, for example, getting down on all fours to discover what it's like to be close to the ground. I've been watching dogs and listening to them; seeing how they communicate, how they move, how they approach each other, what they do when they sleep, what they do when they eat, what they do when they catch a scent in the air. And I've been trying to build all that in to the character of the dingo.

So, have you been through a similar process with the other characters, thinking about how they move, what their strengths and fears are and so on?

Yes. For example, the Auntie Lola character. She's very much like a lot of my older aunts. She's a very strong and proud woman who speaks clearly and concisely and would never go out of her way to hurt someone, but will tell them straight if they've mucked up. She knows her knowledge in and out. And she still has a certain innocence and youth about her, which means that she can possibly be taken for a ride. But if she was to find out, look out!

When you talk about knowledge, you mean the accumulated knowledge and experience of her life time in relation to her culture?

Exactly. Every part of that, right down to the day to day living where she lived, on the river with the other families. The little intricacies like, that family down there had two kids, this family on this side had two boys and a girl, this family had six boys, they married, this young girl was keen on that boy when they went to school. She knows that history of her community and that's the knowledge that she holds; that's what keeps her strong.

"Yanagai! Yanagai!" incorporates a wide range of theatrical elements like music, song, dance, puppetry, chorus work and so forth. The play is asking a lot more of you than just acting, so what other skills have you needed to bring to your performance?

I think there's the cultural sensitivity and the protocols that go along with that: what I've learnt over the years, what our old people have taught me, the way to respect each other, the way to be open and honest with each other. And then to try to portray on stage those things that we hold dear. This is our story. The music and the singing and the composing, those are other skills. Those things are in my blood. I couldn't possibly do another job as well as I can do those, because I know that is what I'm put on the earth to do.

Acting - that is still a new experience for me. Every day I'm in the job, I learn something new. I learn a new term. I learn a new way of rehearsing or a more efficient way of running my lines. I learn how to hold myself as a character in a different way to the way I hold myself. I'm learning these lovely subtleties like the effect a facial expression can have on an audience. I'm learning every day, I can never stop learning.

I'm wondering how the set and the shape of the space affect the work that you do as an actor?

There's a lot of freedom and movement in the stage set. It's quite open and simple; there are not a lot of complexities about it. There's the symbol of the river, with the two banks: Uncle's bank and Sir Edward Curr's bank. There are two very strong trees that stand and then there are scrims that fall all the way through the act, up and down. One of the trees also falls in the second act. The set really helps you to stand and establish yourself as your actor.

It's lovely because it is so reminiscent of the Barmah State Forest where our mob are from and where I've been rubbing my feet in the dirt since I was a kid. That's a lovely essence that we're bringing to the stage, creating the feeling that we're back home in the bush.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about your involvement in "Yanagai! Yanagai!"?

Yes - this production is really important. I feel like we've come to a point where the play has brought together not only the actors, but also several members of the Yorta Yorta family of different generations. In most families and communities, there are struggles between different generations, with different points of view. I feel this is a real step forward for the Yorta Yorta nations because it is representing so many families from our generation, the young generation. I really hope that it will show our old people, both who are here with us now and who are past, that we are strong in what we do and we believe that what we're doing is right and true and honest. I hope that it will help teach not only our family to heal, but that it will also hopefully teach the Australian community to heal and to move forward as one, instead of having these separations all the time. I'm real proud.

INTERVIEW WITH bRYAN ANDY, PERFORMER IN *YANAGAI! YANAGAI!*

bryan would you background how you became involved in the creation of 'Yanagai! Yanagai!'

My name is bryan Andy, from the Yorta Yorta Nation. I first became involved in the development process of *Yanagai! Yanagai!* with Melbourne Workers Theatre about three years ago. Andrea James approached me and asked if I'd do a reading of her script and be involved with the workshop of a script that she'd begun to write. I agreed and so we workshopped the play for about a week and then at the end of that week we presented it in a reading. Andrea has developed the play through this type of workshop process - with a reading at the end of a workshopping week - over the past three years. I've been involved with three of the readings and that is how I became involved with the whole process as a performer.

Do you have a background as a theatre performer?

No I'm not usually a performer, but the content of the play is close to home. I was one of the youngest people in the native title application of the Yorta Yorta to testify as part of the process and as part of the claim. I used to work in the Yorta Yorta Land Claim office with administration and there were about three of us in the office who pretty much dealt with the native title application as a process. So I have worked with it from that angle, then within community education, and then more recently as a policy officer around land justice issues in the State of Victoria with ATSIC Victoria. So I have a background in that sort of field, but not so much as a performer. I used to train public speakers who would talk about native title and land justice in Australia, so there was some experience and attempts at performance in that, but I have no formal drama school or performance training.

Have you found your obviously very deep knowledge of both the development process and land claim process really useful for you in the creation of this play?

Yes, I think it's just been an exciting process. It's great to tackle an issue like land justice or native title from a different avenue and do it in a creative environment with other actors who I've seen on stage heaps of times, people who've inspired me and who I think are amazing. It's been quite fun to be involved with them, working on it from a creative level.

In relation to my knowledge of the background to the claim, I think a lot of my characters relate to me as a person in some way. I can find myself in a character, so it makes it a bit easier in terms of knowing how to represent something or find what Andrea (the playwright) means with certain aspects of the script.

What particular characters and roles do you play in 'Yanagai! Yanagai!'?

I play heaps. It's crazy! I play Lyall whose a character of about 30 years old. He's pretty much the focus of the native title application and the process rests pretty much on his shoulders. He's based in the city and is a Yorta Yorta descendant although he doesn't live up home, *on country* [meaning on the traditional lands] but he's a very interesting character in terms of , 'How do you define an Aboriginal person or a Yorta Yorta person?'. So he's from the city and he's come back home to try to convince an elder, his uncle, to testify as part of the claim so they can show that they have native title rights over the land.

I also play a dingo with another performer, Lou Bennett. The dingoes are these clumsy, clutsy, cheeky creatures and they're quite fun to be involved with. They are sort of side kicks to Munarra, the super-hero-type woman who has been sent back by our god to save the land. This particular part is like a magic realism stream in the play. Another character I play is Little Albert, who is a younger version of the character of Uncle at about 8 years old. I also play a story teller along with three other members of the cast. Then there is Uncle Colin who I also play. He's my grandfather who testified as part of the native title application and we've taken his transcript pretty much as it was, put it on stage and made it theatrical. So I play my grandfather, a dingo, little Albert, Lyall and a story teller - oh, and I'm a fish puppeteer.

Which character do you think you enjoy playing the most?

I don't know. I'd like to say Lyall but he's such a hard character in the sense of just having the weight of the land claim on his shoulders. I enjoy Little Albert because I can be a bit cheeky. The dingoes are fun characters - really irreverent and over the top, although they're very hard and physically demanding. So, probably the dingoes or Little Albert. Little Albert's just like this former uncle and Lou Bennett teams up with me in those scenes playing Little Mae, and it's nice to perform with her.

Would you talk about the development of the different characters you play. In particular how did you approach playing a character who is based on someone from real life as opposed to playing fantasy characters?

I guess with my grandfather, Uncle Colin, he is a bit of a skeptical man and I've sort of tried to take his skepticism and put it on stage although it's not exactly faithful to him. I think that he was quite skeptical of the whole native title claim process. So in the scene where he's testifying, it becomes a process of thinking about his skepticism and trying to place myself within that. There are movements of his that I try to exemplify or find.

Because most of the cast members have been involved with Andrea in developing the script and working on these characters, we've known what she's wanted from each character and with each role. We've been able to bring aspects of ourselves or our family into the roles, whether it be things

such as knowing then playing my grandfather, or with Lyall, sort of seeing myself in him in some respects because I've been working in that environment.

Andrea's been quite clear about what she's wanted from the play and we've been able to develop that with her and then be able to explore it in rehearsal. That's the kind of process we've been through.

'Yanagai! Yanagai!' incorporates a wide range of theatrical elements - music, puppetry, song, story telling, chorus work. You mentioned briefly before about the physicality of the dingoes – what sorts of skills have you had to bring to the play?

I've got to sing in the play and I've got to play a kid. The puppetry has been really interesting. I've never really worked with a puppet before and we've had somebody come in to train us with puppeteering so that you become 'at one' with the puppet. It's quite a nice process to go through. The puppeteer takes you through movement dexterity training and then you apply it and you *become* the puppet. What I've discovered is that there are things that you don't often think about as an audience when you're watching a puppet. Like making the puppet's eyes your eyes and creating the required fluidity with the puppet's movements. The particular puppet I work with is a water puppet and it's quite a process to go through just to make sure that this otherwise clunky puppet isn't, well, clunky. It needs to be fluid and look like it's swimming through water. So the puppeteering has been an interesting process and a steep learning curve. In fact I guess it's all been a bit of a steep learning curve for me because I haven't done this before. But the rest of the cast have been amazing in terms of support and we're a pretty good team of people

In terms of other skills, the dingoes are really very physical characters and very hyper so you have to have enormous energy about you and try to maintain that throughout the scenes that you're featuring in. The challenge then is that you've got to change costumes and tone it down to play a completely different character. So it's up and down, up and down - I guess it's just discipline.

How do you achieve the transitions between the different characters? You mentioned costume changes but are there other processes involved?

In some respects there are quite simple costume changes, you might change your shirt or put on a vest for a dingo for example, and then there are more dramatic character changes made through the use of costume. So that's made it a little bit easier. But each of my characters and many of the other characters that the other actors play have different types of vernacular or ways of speaking. So costumes help, but it's also about the use of the voice and the movement to validate what you do.

How has the set and spatial design assisted the performance process for you?

From the start of the rehearsal period, the rehearsal room has been marked up in the dimensions of the actual set and so that has made it easier. Initially I thought 'How are we going to present or how are we going to rehearse?' and I wondered whether we were just going to do lines and sort of move on an open floor. But we've actually had a sense of the set with us all the time and this has been very handy in terms of knowing which rostrums you have to be on, where trees are, where certain scrims are and this has given us a sense of working around all the elements that will be on stage. I tend to work or remember my lines from movement cues so if I know I have to be by tree three then I know what to say. In terms of the stage set up there are two obvious worlds that exist within the stage space and one is like the Yorta Yorta side and one's a non-indigenous side so the designer, Adrienne Chisholm, has set up those elements.

Is there anything else about this particular creative process that you think is important, relevant or rewarding?

Like I was saying before, it's nice to sort of tackle issues of land justice or native title on another level. I think the play's an amazing script and it has this beautiful balance between divulging enough about who we are as a people and not divulging too much. We are able to show people that we are still here as Yorta Yorta people, that we still have rights to our land and continue to assert connections to our land that should be recognised. And it's nice to have all this articulated in a play that has fun characters and that isn't trying to preach too much or be too confrontational with audiences. I've spoken in lectures or to groups of people and you can talk about these kinds of issues but sometimes they just tune out, whereas with this play it's a lot more intriguing and exciting while at the same time conveying a really strong message. It's more palatable, I think, and more fun.

That's the magic of the story telling process that theatre is - it invites you in, rather than excluding you and that's the really nice part of the process.

About Melbourne Workers Theatre...

Since 1987, Melbourne Workers Theatre has produced powerful, professional theatre of high quality for, with and about working class people. We create innovative new work that responds to situations to find a voice in Australian culture. The voice is strong, compelling and captivating.

We have performed to over 70,000 people in Victoria alone since 1987. We produce work with artists and communities from a range of backgrounds and cultures, and collaborate with other theatre companies.

In 2002, our 15th anniversary year, we staged our 27th new Australian play.

MWT is governed by a Committee of Management, but ultimately it is our constituency that informs the artistic direction of the Company – creatively, socially and politically. We actively encourage our membership, the community and indeed anyone with a voice that needs to be heard, to take an active and vital role in the work of the company.

A short history of Melbourne Workers Theatre...

Melbourne Workers Theatre began in the late 1980s in a climate of aggression towards trade unions which affected workers and their families throughout the world. Union deregistrations and attacks like Robe River, SEQEB, the Mudginberri meatworkers, and the Dollars Sweets dispute were rife!

The company formed to address questions such as 'What does it mean to be a trade unionist at this particular time and under these particular attacks?'

An 18 week 'Art in Working Life' project was endorsed by the Combined Unions Shop Committee at the 600 strong Jolimont railway workshop. Our Theatre Company in residence was set up in a transportable shed by company founders Patricia Cornelius, Steve Payne and Michael White. Melbourne Workers Theatre had arrived!

Some of the works developed and produced by MWT

State of Defence (1987), Dusting our Knees (1988), The Ballad of Lois Ryan (1988), Nidgera (1990), The Aftermath (1989), Taxi (1990), Black Cargo (1991), No Fear (1991), Daily Grind (1992), Last Drinks (1992), Deadlines (1993), Great Day (1993), Hardtimes (1994), Home of a Stranger (1994/5), Oh, My God I'm Black (1995), Up the Ladder (1995/1997), Road Movie (1996), Little City (1996/97), Ooogadee Boogadees (1997), Who's Afraid of the Working Class (2000) and 1975 (2003)

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QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Content and Themes:

1. Playwright, Andrea James says, '...through theatre you can project emotion...'
 ♦ What do you think the playwright/director, Andrea James mean by this comment?
 ♦ Why is emotion so important to this particular story?
 ♦ Why is theatre effective as a medium for conveying and evoking emotion?
2. In talking about her reasons for writing the play, Andrea James says, 'I didn't think the mainstream media was covering our perspective very well'.
 ♦ Do you believe the perspective of Indigenous people is conveyed effectively through electronic and print media?
 ♦ What other perspectives are often conveyed?
3. The playwright talks about the central themes running through the play as being those of 'a sense of grief and loss which layers everything' and 'a determination to keep moving forward as a people'.
 ♦ Can you think of moments in the play that highlight these particular themes?
4. While not a central theme, playwright Andrea James hopes that reconciliation will be one of the outcomes of audiences attending the play.
 ♦ How do you think the play may achieve this?

Style

1. In describing the style of her play, Andrea James says, 'For me there are three styles... naturalism, mythical/surreal/symbolic, chorus work'
 ♦ Can you identify examples from the play that illustrate each of these styles?
2. Why do you think this particular story needs to be told using a variety of theatrical styles?
3. What are some of the theatrical conventions used to create these different styles?
4. Can you think of a way to describe the overall style of the play?
5. Lou Bennett, the composer, says that when she was writing the music it came from the characters' emotions '... loss, sadness, pain and hope...'
 ♦ What function do you think the music plays in *Yanagai! Yanagai!*?

Dramaturgy

1. Andrea James, in her interview talks about the dramaturgical process she underwent in writing *Yanagai! Yanagai!* with dramaturg, Patricia Cornelius.
 - ◆ What do you understand by the term 'dramaturgy'?
2. In what sorts of ways did Patricia Cornelius provide Andrea James with dramaturgical assistance?

Acting and Actor/Audience Relationship

1. The actors in *Yanagai! Yanagai!* play a wide variety of roles from animals to chorus members, from older people to young children.
 - ◆ What different techniques do they use to create these diverse characters?
2. What particular physical/vocal/spatial choices have been made by the director and actors in *Yanagai! Yanagai!*?
3. What different performance skills are required by the performers in the play?
4. bryan Andy talks about how nice it has been to work in a play that articulates important ideas, but that also 'has fun characters and...isn't trying to preach too much...to audiences'
 - ◆ What was your experience as an audience member watching *Yanagai! Yanagai!*
 - ◆ What impact did the play have on your understanding of the Yorta Yorta experience?

Stagecraft elements

1. How does the design capture the essence of the river?
2. Yorta Yorta artists were heavily involved in working with designer, Adrienne Chisolm, and sound designer, David Franzke, in order to create the visual and aural experience of the play.
 - ◆ What aspects of Indigenous arts are evident in the design elements of this play?
3. How does the design reflect the different styles within the play?
4. In what ways do the design elements heighten or emphasise the spoken text?
5. Lou Bennett talks about the set being 'reminiscent of the Barmah State Forest...where I've been rubbing my feet in the dirt ever since I was a kid...'
 - ◆ How do the design and text of *Yanagai! Yanagai!* capture the essence of the connection that Yorta Yorta people feel with their land?

Resources

The following resources are suggested as further reading for some of the themes and issues raised by the play, *Yanagai! Yanagai!*

Newspaper Articles:

- *The Age*, 10th October, 1996
- *The Age*, 30th April, 1999
- *The Age*, 3rd September, 2000
- *The Age*, 8th March, 2000
- *The Age*, 13th December, 2002***

****A good read*

Websites:

- www.aiatsis.gov.au Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies***
- www.atsic.gov.au Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission
- www.nntt.gov.au National Native Title Tribunal

****Lots of information*

Publications:

- Alford, K. 1999a *Washed Away on a Tide of White History*, Guardian Weekly, 21 March (p 42-4)
- Atkinson, W. 2003 *Reworking History: The Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim before and after Mabo*, Conference Paper
- Brennan, F. 1995 *one land one nation: Mabo towards 2001*, Uni of QLD Press
- Christie, M.F 1979 *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria 1835-1886*, Sydney University Press

Legal Cases:

- *Mabo v State of Queensland (No 2)* [1992] 107 HCA ALR 1.
- *Yorta Yorta Community v The State of Victoria & Ors* [1998] FC - VG 6001-95
- *Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v State of Victoria* [1999] FCA V34
- *Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v State of Victoria* [2001] FCA 45