

An Actor Prepares: what Brian told me

by Liza-Mare Syron

"I felt a feeling of shame for not knowing my own heritage, my own history, and my lack of understanding of Culture and its place in performance practice for Aboriginal artists and performers."



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I came to my identity as an Aboriginal person in 1979, I was sixteen. I lived in Balmain, an inner suburb of Sydney with my family. All of my family lived in Balmain in the late seventies. It was in that year that my father Fredrick George Kenny passed away suddenly from a heart attack. In her 2005 article on the passing of a Birripi elder Horace Saunders, Erin O'Dwyer states that, 'heart attack and stroke is the leading killer of Aborigines, with cardio vascular disease accounting for more than one in four deaths, fifteen times greater than other Australians¹. Like Horace, who was forty-nine at the time of his death, my father was also a descendant of the Birripi people of Taree in northern NSW. He was thirty-eight when he succumbed to angina.

Not long after the funeral, my father's uncle, Brian Syron, came to visit me at school one day. He told me on a grassy hill at Balmain High that I was Aboriginal, just like that, although it was posed to me as a question. 'Do you know you are Aboriginal?' My response was ambiguous with a shrug of my shoulders, a smirk on my face, and a scratch of the head. I was not quite sure why he wanted to tell me this, although many things did click for me at that moment. Like why my mother screamed hysterically the time my father bought home a letterbox covered in red, black and yellow stripes emblazoned with a shield and spear, a gift from his mates at the Electricity Commission. My two sisters and I sat staring at its significance and its ability to cause such a storm of emotion from my mother who wanted 'that thing' out of the house. It was not until some years later that I realised it was an object of identification, painted in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, its crest a symbol of a pre-colonial existence. It represented something my mother seemed ashamed of, my father's Aboriginal heritage. These times were very different in Australia's history, and I will just say that it was less than ten years after the referendum. Attitudes towards 'Aboriginality' have since changed, including my mother's.

¹ Erin O'Dwyer, "Spirit of a big-hearted fisherman still lingers close to shore," Sydney Morning Herald, 5 June 2005, www.smh.com.au/news/National/Spirit-of-a-bighearted-fisherman-still-lingers-close-to-shore/2005/06/04/1117825105813.html.

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Brian told me that 'they' would pay for me to stay at school. So, I went on to finish my Higher School Certificate the following year, supported by a small allowance provided by a government policy designed to assist in the educational outcomes for Aboriginal people. I received three dollars a week, and my mother twelve dollars a fortnight. I am, as Wesley Enoch describes, "[an adult] who grew up in a time when Aboriginal people were surrounded by a discourse of disadvantage".² It was from this discourse that many educational, social and political policies evolved, providing very real strategies that enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people opportunities not afforded their parents, opportunities like financial incentives for parents to keep their children at school, apprenticeships, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified jobs.

During the late seventies and early eighties Brian had held acting classes in a small studio on William Street in Darlinghurst, Sydney. He boasted such students as Helen Morse, John Hargraves, Lydia Miller and Rhoda Roberts. Brian's specialty was the 'American Method' he learnt from his acting teacher Stella Adler. He had spent many years studying under Adler at her New York City school during the late sixties. During that time Brian returned only a handful of times, but each with gifts, and I always received a new outfit. My relationship with Brian was quite often strained in my early twenties due to the loss of my father and my subsequent recovery, and in 1986 I left Sydney to audition for the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) acting course in Melbourne; I was twenty-four. Before I left, Brian suggested I change my surname from Kenny to Syron, which he believed would assist my career. I took his advice.

At my first attempt, and from my first audition, I gained a three-year position in the acting stream at VCA. Whilst at drama school from 1987-1990 I did not identify as a person of Aboriginal heritage. It is not always apparent that I am. I am not embarrassed by my heritage, nor do I hide it. Whilst at VCA however it was more that it did not seem relevant to the training I was undertaking, or perhaps it was the lack of other Indigenous students in the course that made it difficult for me to

² Wesley Enoch, NIDA, June 2007.

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discuss, and participate in, my Aboriginality. In retrospect, when thinking about the course, Aboriginal theatre and history played no part in that training experience.

After graduating in 1990 I entered a 'professional' life, or 'the real world'. I worked sporadically as an actor over the next three years in various professional roles in musical theatre, puppetry, and in television in Melbourne. On my return to Sydney in 1993 I found myself an agent, who in identifying my name immediately connected me to Brian. I was from then on framed by my heritage. I had a tick a box identity, Aboriginal.

Playwright Maryanne Sam in *Casting Doubts* (2002) wrote about this very issue examining the role of Aboriginality in a broader cultural context of the Australian entertainment industry. The play centres on a group of young Aboriginal actors competing for various Aboriginal roles. The issue of colour casting is highlighted throughout the play by the character of Deborah, a casting agent who is desperately trying to find Aboriginal actors for roles in a period film. In one of her monologues she describes her anguish;

Maud darling. It's Deborah. *Northern blessed spears!* I need more Aboriginal actors.... Well, what do they look like..? Well do they really look like an Aborigine? You know, have they got those features? The nose... the forehead thing...? And how do they talk...? Do they sound like an Aborigine?

Later in the monologue Deborah states;

"God what a day I've had today Maudie. Only three turned up and when they did, one of them was, well... white! He said he was an Aborigine. (2002, p. 146).

Although a fictitious account, much of what the play examines resonates for me. In my case, I was now sent to audition for parts in plays that were identified as Aboriginal, and this caused me quite a bit of concern. Not necessarily because I don't think I look Aboriginal, but that I did not know what it meant to be an

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Aboriginal actor? I had a feeling it was more than just about the colour of my skin, or my features, or if I talked 'Aboriginal' or not. Then at my first gig in Sydney I got to experience what it meant to be an Aboriginal actor first hand. Not surprisingly it was in an identified role in an Aboriginal story.

In 1994, the Griffin Theatre Company and Sydney Festival mounted *Shark Island Stories*, a children's show written by non-Aboriginal playwright, Mary Morris³. *Shark Island Stories* was an adaptation of *The Flying Emu and other Stories* by Aboriginal writer Sally Morgan. Professional contemporary dancer Michael Leslie was involved in the choreography, Bronwyn Bancroft designed the costumes, and the cast of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors, dancers, and musicians included John Blair, Gary Cooper, Marlene Cummins, Malcolm Mitchell, Penny Williams, and Pauline McLeod. I remember distinctly that my initiation as an Aboriginal actress began early one morning of the first week sitting on the ferry with Pauline and Marlene on our way to that day's rehearsal. I was grilled relentlessly all that day on my knowledge of Aboriginal theatre history, Culture, and performance practice.

I knew Brian had been heavily involved in something in Redfern in the 1970's. I was front row with my dad at the Bondi Pavilion production of Bobby Merritt's *The Cake Man* in 1977. I was fourteen. I remember being escorted after the show to the dressing room where I met a tall magnificent looking woman with a large conic Afro. It was Justine Saunders, a Woppaburra woman from Queensland, and she was naked, although she did have on her seventies cane wedged shoes. I noted that everyone seemed to be sporting an Afro; it must have been the look at the time. This memory is all I had to offer as an example of my experience of an Aboriginal play. It was all I knew at the time. On that day, sitting there on that ferry with Pauline and Marlene listening to them share their stories of how they work and how they use Cultural material in their own work, I felt a feeling of shame for not knowing my own heritage, my own history, and my lack of understanding of Culture and its place in performance practice for Aboriginal artists and performers.

³ Morris is most famous for her stage adaptation of Morris Gleitzman's, *Two Weeks with the Queen*. *Shark Island Stories*

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It was in this feeling of shame that I realised there existed an experience particular to this group of people, especially when in contact with each other.

I was conscious of my own practice from the skills and training I received from my time at VCA. But coming into the *Shark Island* production where I engaged with others who had a very different perception of practice, a new experience emerged. This was quite unexpected. Firstly, I came to know that when working with other Aboriginal actors a Cultural engagement became possible. Each performer brought with them their own experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and how they felt it contributed to their practice as performers. The cast also shared stories of their experiences of being Aboriginal. I was then able to continue my own, as limited as it was, to this experience. From this encounter a new sense of belonging then emerged. I felt that slowly my place in the production was clearer, not for the producers, but for the Aboriginal cast. The members of the *Shark Island Stories* made me fully aware of my position in relation to this practice by conveying to me that there was an obligation to continue to articulate these experiences and knowledges that we constructed together during that production. It was also made clear to me that it was my heritage and destiny to do so. My part was in the receiving of this experience. It then became my obligation to tell of this experience.

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Liza-Mare's qualifications include a Masters in Adult Education (UTS), Master of Creative Arts Research (UOW), a Diploma in Dramatic Arts (VCA), and a Certificate in Playwriting (NIDA). In 1998 Liza-Mare received an Australia Day Award for, Community Event of the Year (SSC). Liza-Mare is currently a Doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney Performance Studies Department.