

Black Diggers

by Tom Wright



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Foreword

One purpose of Indigenous theatre is to write onto the public record neglected or forgotten stories.

Many of these stories survive in our oral storytelling traditions and have been passed down through families to arrive today as folklore — stories of the people. Theatre has become a crossover point where these stories are made public and expressed to demonstrate our history.

One hundred years ago, Indigenous servicemen volunteered to fight for the newly formed country called Australia. Though the constitution of this newest of old countries did not recognise them as citizens, Indigenous men signed up and fought in Palestine, the Somme, Gallipoli, Flanders Fields and every major battlefield during what would be called the Great War. Despite limited social standing, appalling living conditions and lack of human rights, Indigenous men enlisted. Was it the sense of freedom and adventure? Was it the fact that the newly minted AIF (Australian Imperial Force) had no way of administratively recognising their Indigenous background and hence granted all soldiers the same rights? Or was it a sense of patriotism in a country that offered renewed hope for change?

Over one thousand Indigenous men fought side by side with their white countrymen and forged bonds that would sow the seeds of the modern reconciliation movement.

When constructing this piece of theatre we were confronted by the enormity of the task, the cultural protocols, the military records, the family lore — so we adopted a broad acceptance of truth. In post apartheid South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission there was a four-part definition of truth:

- Personal truth — the thing you believe to be true
- Social truth — what a group believe to be true through discussion and debate
- Forensic truth — the truth that can be proven through science and records
- Public truth — the value of telling the truth for the greater good

Stories have come to us through interviews with family members, scouring the official records, scholarly historical analysis and research and our own narratives; we believe them all to have equal value and truth.

Black Diggers honours the memories of these men and their families and through them demonstrates the long history of national service and participation in public life by Indigenous Australians. We follow a number of

archetypal character journeys based on real-life events in a fragmented view of history. It's like the shellshock experience of those in war — fragments of story mixed with emotional responses. There are 60 scenes broken into five parts:

- Pre-Nation — a reflection on the wars and experience of Indigenous people before nationhood
- Enlistment — the process of Indigenous men signing up
- The Theatre of War — the stories from the front as reported in journals, letters, official records and oral history
- The Return — the effects of returning and the expectations of both the men who returned and those they were returning to
- Legacy — what has been left behind for us

The invitation is to accumulate the stories and follow the characters/actors as they journey through. It has been a great honour to work on this project with such a dedicated and insightful group of contributors. There is much we know and there is much we can never know but sharing stories is the best way for us all to know more. If you know a story of Indigenous service in World War I or have a photo or a piece of ephemera, please contact the Australian War Memorial and have it recorded. As we commemorate the centenary of World War I these words become even more apt.

Lest We Forget.

Wesley Enoch
Director

Introduction

Trying to write about our history is always a fraught exercise. Questions leap to the mind, over and over again: *Whose* history is this? And who *owns* it? But when a set of stories is at the intersection of big national myths and profound moments in Indigenous experience, then the exercise is potentially a minefield, if you'll forgive the over-apt analogy.

I inherited this job with six months to go before rehearsals began. Research the weight of several phone books landed on my desk, and it became very clear that there is no one central black experience of WW1. It differs from family to family, from community to community, from individual to individual. One young man could walk into a recruiting hall, enlist, serve, discover brotherhood with white mates who had previously ignored him, and come home with a strange new pride. That same man's childhood friend might encounter racism and rejection, at enlistment, in service, and afterwards. One country town might ignore black servicemen at ANZAC day, while the town over the hill would celebrate their service. And of course, many of the Indigenous servicemen never came home, lying still in strange unfamiliar mud on the other side of the world.

We have decided to not use actual names in this production, in case of an innocent factual mistake, and out of respect for the difficult tension within communities and families between fact and myth. But all the scenes in *Black Diggers* are based on genuine moments; real men, reported incidents, documented arguments. It deliberately tries to be a patchwork quilt of the past, presenting a variety of short sharp scenes, as if the theatre itself is suffering from shellshock. It's not trying to tear apart Australian myths about war (that may be for another time and place). It is about putting black faces back into all our history.

Much thanks to Dr. David Williams and Louise Gough, and to Aboriginal elders and communities for allowing me in.

Tom Wright

Tom Wright



Tom Wright started as a member of Barrie Kosky's Gilgul in the early 90s, then with Michael Kantor's Mene Mene in the late 90s. He has worked as an actor and director at the Melbourne Theatre Company, STCSA, Sydney Theatre Company, Playbox, La Mama, Company B, Anthill, Gilgul, Mene Mene, Bell Shakespeare Company, Chunky Move, Black Swan State Theatre Company, Chamber Made Opera and the Adelaide, Sydney, Edinburgh, Vienna, Perth and Melbourne Festivals. He was Artistic Associate at Sydney Theatre Company 2004–2008 and Associate Director of Sydney Theatre Company 2008 to 2012.

He has written a number of plays or adaptations, including *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Castle*, *Ubu*, *This is a True Story*, *Lorilei*, *Medea*, *Babes in the Wood*, *Puntilla and His Man Matti*, *Tense Dave*, *The Odyssey*, *The Lost Echo*, *Criminology* (with Lally Katz), *Tales From the Vienna Woods*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Women of Troy*, *The War of the Roses*, *The Duel*, *Baal*, *Optimism*, *Oresteia*, *On the Misconception of Oedipus* and *The Histrionic*. The radio version of his play *Lorilei* won the Gold Drama Award (British Radio Academy) and BBC Radio Drama Award, 2007. His adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *The Lost Echo*, won five Helpmann awards in 2007, including Best Play. His adaptation of Shakespeare's history plays, *The War of the Roses*, won six Helpmanns in 2009, including Best Production.

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Aaron Pedersen, Annie Sutton, Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, Aunty Verna Koolmatrie, Australian War Memorial, Belvoir, Brisbane Festival, Carriageworks, City of Sydney Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel, Clyde Rigney, Dr David Williams, Department of Veteran Affairs, Elizabeth Rechniewski, Fabienne Cooke, Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Garth O'Connell, Gary Oakley, His Excellency Patrick Renault, Belgian Ambassador to Australia (2009 –2013), Imogen Millhouse, Josephine Ridge, Julia Morwood, Kim Spinks, Louise Gough, Liza-Mare Syron, Malarndirri McCarthy, Margaret Beadman, Mark Stapleton, Michael Rowe, Loretta Busby, National Archives of Australia National Indigenous Television (NITV), Noel Staunton, Phillippa Scarlett, Professor Richard White, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Raukkan Schools (Meningie Area School and Birdwood High School), Rhoda Roberts, Robyn Archer, Ronald Briggs, Sam Vanoverschelde, State Library of NSW, State Library of QLD, Sydney Opera House, Travis Cardona, University of Sydney, Wim Opbrouck.

First Production Details

Black Diggers was first produced by Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival, and presented by Sydney Festival in association with The Balnaves Foundation, premiering in the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House on January 18, 2014.

DIRECTOR	Wesley Enoch
SET DESIGNER	Stephen Curtis
COSTUME DESIGNER	Ruby Langton-Batty
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Ben Hughes
COMPOSER/SOUND DESIGNER	Tony Brompton
DRAMATURG	Louise Gough
CULTURAL CONSULTANT	George Bostock
RESEARCHER	David Williams
CAST	Luke Carroll George Bostock David Page Hunter Page-Lochard Guy Simon Colin Smith Eliah Watego Meyne Wyatt Tibian Wyles

BLACK DIGGERS INDIGENOUS REFERENCE GROUP

Uncle Harry Allie
Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver AM
Dr Jackie Huggins AM FAHA
Pastor Ray Minniecon
Gary Oakley
Garth O'Connell
Colin Watego

Production Photos



Photo Credit: © Branco Gaica
From Left: Tibian Wyles, David Page, Hunter Page-Lochard, Meyne Wyatt, George Bostock, Guy Simon, Luke Carroll, Eliah Watego & Colin Smith. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica



Photo Credit: © Branco Gaica
Colin Smith. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica



From left: George Bostock & Luke Carroll. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica



From left: Tibian Wyles, Eliah Watego, Guy Simon & Luke Carroll. Sydney Opera House, 2014. Photographer: Branco Gaica

Notes

For nine male indigenous actors

Black Diggers

ACT ONE

1887. Bellenden Ker, Queensland.

Darkness. The sound of Australia.

Gunfire. Confusion. Screaming, running, shouted orders. Silhouettes.

SETTLER The rest have gone, bugger it.

BOUNDARY
RIDER They won't be back. Someone else's problem now.

SETTLER What's that noise, one of 'em still alive?

STOCKMAN In that humpy. No, the other one.

SETTLER Oh hell, don't tell me it's a bloody picaninny.

Gestures, a man comes over with a lantern.

STOCKMAN 'Fraid so. Boy.

BOUNDARY
RIDER Just ... do something to shut its mouth and leave it, let the
 dogs worry about it.

STOCKMAN I'm not getting involved in this.

SETTLER You were happy enough to fill its mother's back with pellets.

STOCKMAN Now that's different and you know it.

BOUNDARY
RIDER What do you do with an abandoned calf?

STOCKMAN Well that depends on the beast in question.

SETTLER I want to be back in Innisfail by noon, we don't have time to lug some itty around. Put it on the ground.

He takes out his shotgun. Enter two others.

TAXIDERMIST What in the name of heaven is going on?

The SETTLER leaves.

STOCKMAN Picaninny, Professor. His mother seems to have decamped.

TAXIDERMIST What are you going to do with it?

BOUNDARY

RIDER

That's just what we were debating.

The TAXIDERMIST picks the child up.

TAXIDERMIST I don't think there's a debate. [**Looks at the child in his arms.**] Full-blood, too. Unusual. Perfect specimen. And if I'd been only five minutes later ... it's all chance, and fate. [**To the baby**] Look at you. Back from the dead, if only you knew it.

He sings, gently at first, a hymn, to soothe the baby. Joining the hymn, men move across the space and reassemble, sitting on the ground.

1914. Somewhere on the Gwydir.

Older white bloke with a stick walks past them, but can't help himself, decides to give them an earful.

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER I don't know how you fellows can just ... sit there on your backsides. There are momentous events sweeping the world.

HARRY Like what sir?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Oh come on Harry, surely you have —

ONE OF

HARRY'S MATES What events?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER We are at war.

Brief pause. Wind and birds.

HARRY I can't hear anything.

ONE OF

HARRY'S MATES It's a quiet war.

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER A war that could easily threaten all that is right, and true, and valuable to us all.

HARRY Where?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Oh, in far distant lands, many days over the horizon.

HARRY Narrabri?

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Further, than that my friend.

HARRY Oh, Coonabarabran.

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Europe. Belgium. And in the Ottoman Empire.

HARRY First we've heard about it.

RETIRED

SCHOOLMASTER Well, you might think about it. You younger chaps might think about it. Where your duties might lie. What sort of men you want to be. Think about what it might mean, if swathes of Mahomedan Turks or creeping armies of sausage-breathed Huns over-ran our country, imposing their foreign ways, interfering with our women. Imagine the horrors of what it would be like if we were to lose, and you wake up one morning and find us all under occupation.

HARRY Yeah. Imagine.

They laugh. The old bloke moves on muttering under his breath. They join him, mimicking him at first, but one of them has a bass-drum, their parade of mimicry becomes a rallying march.

'Sons Of The Southern Cross'

They sing

*There's eucalyptus in the air
And golden wattle in our hair
Join us, sons of Southern Cross
Cooee and let our brothers hear
Australian boys don't shirk or fear
Sons of the Southern Cross
We'll be there!*

The drum fades in the distance, they resume their positions.

1914.

HARRY Where are they goin'?

ERN Army. Fighting.

HARRY Yeah, I know. But why?

ERN, BOB, NORM Buggered if we know.

HARRY No-one knows what it's all about.

HARRY'S MATE Actually, there has been a long build-up of tension across the continent of Europe, and a wide range of factors; industrial, mercantile, territorial, ethnic, have been leading to a sequence of diplomatic impasses for some time. Much of it can be traced back to the failure of Europe to reach a settlement after the war between Prussia and France about forty years ago. Inside the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires there have been independence movements from smaller nationalities that have destabilised vested interests and external nations have used these to try to leverage influence or simply to assist in colonial expansion. Some mad Balkan nationalist shot the Austrian Emperor's nephew and Austria went in when Serbia started mobilising, having been given an ultimatum deliberately designed to inflame the situation. The Germans supported them because of a treaty going back thirty years. And the other nations all had reasons to go in to protect their interests and that of their allies. So in the end what we're seeing is the culmination of structural problems in continental Europe that have been festering for over four decades.

Pause

HARRY Yeah, no-one knows what it's about.

They become stuffed primates in an nineteenth-century museum.

1895. Australian Museum, Sydney.

A young boy, is being taken through a museum. The actors play the stuffed exhibits.

LITTLE BOY
(NIGEL)

Look father I've found something

TAXIDERMIST

And this is a lowland gorilla Nigel. From Africa. His pelt was sent all the way from Zanzibar, with a plaster cast of his skull. I had to make the rest up from drawings in books. See how I've mounted him just as he was in the jungle?

NIGEL

Is he a man?

TAXIDERMIST

No, he's an ape. But they're related to us.

NIGEL

Am I related to you?

TAXIDERMIST

Of course Nigel. This is an *albibarbus*, a Borneo gibbon.

NIGEL

How are we related?

TAXIDERMIST

I'm your father.

NIGEL

No, I mean how are we related to the ape?

TAXIDERMIST

Eons ago there were no apes and there were no men. There were creatures that looked something like a small monkey though. And some gradually over time became apes, much like the big red-haired one at the zoo remember Nigel? And like that gorilla and this gibbon. And some began to walk on two legs, and use language and tools, and establish the Free Presbyterian church, and learn taxidermy and other useful skills.

NIGEL

Father, what happened to my aborigine parents?

TAXIDERMIST

You know that, little man. They died.

NIGEL

How did they die?

TAXIDERMIST I'll tell you one day. Look, a chimpanzee. They are our closest relatives

NIGEL Why not now?

TAXIDERMIST Because you're not ready yet.

NIGEL Ready for what?

TAXIDERMIST The world — the bigger, grown-up world — is a complicated, difficult place. You should enjoy every moment of your childhood. Plenty of time for the truth later.

NIGEL So, they died badly?

TAXIDERMIST Wrong place at the wrong time.

NIGEL Killed?

TAXIDERMIST Yes. But please don't tell your mother I told you that.

NIGEL Were they scared? Dad? Dad?

His dad has vanished. He looks at the exhibits, who are still, then they roar and rush at him. He flees, leaving the other blokes at a pub. Three of them have empty glasses and even emptier pockets.

1916. Boundary Hotel, Brisbane.

- NORM So when was the last time it got sent down?
- BOB Dunno. Drips and drabs.
- NORM Bloody ridiculous.
- ERN You know, army pay — straight to us.
- BOB They wouldn't do that. Would still go to the protector.
- ERN Not a Queensland thing. An Australian thing. A Melbourne thing. Federal thing. Pounds, shilling and pence, in your pocket, he's none the wiser.
- NORM So, who would check up?
- ERN No-one. That's the point. Soldiers. If you can fire a gun and stand in the sun, they might pretend to forget you're ...
- NORM What??

1915. Petrie Terrace.

The publican shouts; suddenly they are in a recruiting hall.

RECRUITING

SERGEANT Right, next!

ERN G'day.

RECRUITING SGT What?

ERN I'm here.

RECRUITING SGT Look, I'm a busy man and this is serious — oh. You're here here? I see. How old are you?

ERN I reckon nineteen.

RECRUITING SGT You reckon nineteen. Speak to him.

At a desk elsewhere in the space.

RECRUITING

CORPORAL [*Head over his papers*] Next! Name!

ERN Does it have to be my real name?

RECRUITING CPL Yes, of course. But frankly how would I know what your real name is? So, name?

ERN Ernest Hopkins.

RECRUITING CPL Age and place of birth?

ERN Nineteen, Barambah.

RECRUITING CPL Barambah? [*looks up for the first time*] Jesus Christ! Pardon the profanity. You can't come in here.

ERN Why not?

RECRUITING CPL Well, you're ... you're not a citizen.

- ERN Subject of His Majesty.
- RECRUITING CPL Smart alec eh? Here. Here's your form. It'll go down a treat at the protector's office.
- ERN 'Deficient Physique'. What does that mean?
- RECRUITING CPL It's all there. Next!
- ERN 'Reason: Of Strongly Aboriginal Appearance'
- ERN looking a bit bewildered. Out on the street.*
- What does yours say?
- NORM 'Flat feet (Aboriginal)'
- ERN Yours?
- BOB 'No White Parentage.'
- ERN They're just making this up. No-one has any bloody idea.
- They do a circuit of the stage. The SERGEANT and CORPORAL change hats/places. They have come to a different recruiting hall.*
- Nobody knows us here. We'll do it different this time.
- RECRUITING SGT I'm sorry son, I have no idea what to do with this. With you. Wait here.
- He goes and talks to a superior. There is much consulting of books and disagreements until half a dozen men are all scratching their heads and carrying on.*
- Anyone have the slightest idea what 'Substantially European' means?
- CLERK Use your eyes.
- CORPORAL What do you look for, their native blood or their British blood?

CLERK There must be some description somewhere?

SECRETARY We can't have darkies in the same battalions as white chaps.

CORPORAL But how dark?

RECRUITING SGT Perhaps if we had a letter from the relevant Protector that would cover it?

CLERK If they're willing to get up off their backsides and show a bit of pluck then they're white enough for me.

RECRUITING SGT So I just make a decision based on what's standing in front of me?

OFFICER Name?

ERN Arthur Philip

BOB Albert Street

NORM Georges River?

OFFICER Date of birth?

ERN September fourth eighteen ninety.

BOB September fourth eighteen ninety one.

NORM Same

OFFICER And the place?

ERN Baram — ... Murgon.

BOB Same

NORM Same

OFFICER Are you, would you say, Substantially European?

ERN What?

RECRUITING SGT Are you, would you say, Substantially European? Your father was white, wasn't he? Let's say 'yes'. Join that line. Right, nine more and I'm on track for a boomerang.

They melt into a line-up; a DOCTOR and his clerk moving along.

DOCTOR Height?

ERN Five foot five inches.

DOCTOR Weight?

ERN Ten stone four.

DOCTOR Chest

ERN Yeah, I've got one.

CLERK Smallpox marks?

DOCTOR None.

ERN I'm fit as a mallee bull, me.

CLERK Any congenital peculiarities or long-term diseases?

DOCTOR Stewth, what do we say to that one?

CLERK I'll put down "Very strongly aboriginal in type".

ERN How did you work that one out?

They laugh and put on uniforms, hats, boots, most of which don't fit.