

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Indigenous languages in the theatre

Student guest blogger Mercedes Roetman writes... In the last few years I have been to see a number of plays where the main language has been an Indigenous Language. The first play I would like to talk about is a play called Ngapartji Ngapartji – meaning ‘I give you something, you give me something’. The play was held [...]

MAY 23, 2012  3   

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few years I have been to see a number of plays where the main language has been an Indigenous Language. The first play I would like to talk about is a play called [Ngapartji Ngapartji](#) – meaning ‘I give you something, you give me something’. The play was held at the [Belvoir St Theatre](#) in Surry Hills, Sydney. I went to the play not knowing anything about it. One of the first things that happened in the play was that we were all taught *head, shoulders, knees and toes* in Pitjantjatjara!! The main actor Trevor Jamieson had everyone in the audience up on their feet singing ‘*kata, alipiri, muti, tjina*’. I saw the play in 2008 and I still remember the Pitjantjatjara names today.

The play was one of the most moving and eye opening plays I have ever seen, Trevor Jamieson is a very charismatic, engaging and extremely entertaining story teller. He tells the story of his people and the horrific effects of the atomic testing at Maralinga. The story is about three generations of his family who live in Ernabella in South Australia, and how they became refugees in their own country and the effects of the atomic testing that had on their lives.

Throughout the play he changes from Pitjantjatjara to English and he also has on stage his aunties who are the choir. All the songs are sung in Pitjantjatjara, they are songs that were originally sung in English, for example Talking

Heads' *Once In A Lifetime* (Wantiriyalani in Pitjantjatjara), and each song forms part of the story; Burt Bacharach's *This Guy's In Love With You* is used for Trevor's parents' courtship. It is only later in the play that you realise the significance of the initial *kata, alipiri, muti, tjina* song when after the atomic bombing, the scientists did testing on bones to discover the level of strontium 90. It was after this testing that the scientific community and the military begin to see the devastating effects the bombing had on the Indigenous people of that area. Indigenous people were warned about the testing, the only problem was that the signs that were put up were all in English, which they did not understand. There is also [a website](#) in conjunction with the play that teaches about Pitjantjatjara language, history and culture.



Trevor

Jamieson wanted to take the play home to Ernabella. He made a documentary called '[Nothing Rhymes With Ngapartji](#)' about what he went through to take this home, where everyone in the audience were all Indigenous. He had to correct his Pitjantjatjara, so that they would understand him. He also had to deal with the issue of traditional law, because in the play he talks and shows footage of his recently deceased father. The

end result is that it is well received in the community, because they believe it is an important issue people should know what happened.

Trevor Jamieson did another play in 2010 that was also in both Pitjantjatjara and English, called [Nyuntu Ngali](#) (You We two) at the Sydney Theatre Company. This play was very different to *Ngapartji Ngapartji* in that it was set in the 22nd Century and everyone is Pitjantjatjara! It is the story of two young people who meet, fall in love and get married, but they are wrong way marriage and have to run away to have their baby. The play is very dynamic and there is a lot of moving around, music and talks about climate change and culture. As with the other play the way that the translations are done means that you know exactly what is going on there is never a moment when you are not sure because you do not speak Pitjantjatjara.

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py8xZjKXAFU>[/youtube]

In contrast to these two plays, last year I went to see a play called [Bloodlands](#) also at the Sydney Theatre Company. This play was directed by Stephen Page, from the [Bangarra Dance Company](#) with cultural consultants Kathy Balngayngu Marika and Djakapurra Munyarryun both from north-east Arnhemland. This play was almost completely done in Yolngu, every now and then

there was a smattering of English but not very much at all. The play is about the cultural wasteland of the Indigenous people living between the consumerism of white man and their traditional ancient ways. I understood the play even without understanding the language they were speaking. However, in hindsight and rather arrogantly, I did expect them to break into English for most of the play, but after thinking about it, it was not necessary because the story and the acting was more than enough to understand what it was about.



It really is wonderful to see plays with Indigenous actors and in Indigenous languages. Initially it can be a little confronting because at least if you go see a foreign film there are subtitles and usually you understand some words, whereas with Indigenous languages because they are not so commonly heard or learnt, for example, here in Sydney it could make you think twice about going. There are incredible companies that support Indigenous theatre for example the [Balnaves Foundation](#), [Windmill](#), [BighART](#) and the theatres such as [Belvoir](#) and the [Sydney Theatre Company](#). Another interesting point I would like to make is

that all three plays mentioned above, in the audience were lots of high school students so it is good to see schools encouraging and including this in their studies.

One final thing which I saw and thought was great, was I went to see a Shakespearean play at the end of last year 'As You Like It' at the Belvoir. Trevor Jamieson (am a big fan of his!) was in the play, his first role was as an old man advising his young master. Early on in the play they go bush and he (Trevor) goes away to die, as he is laying down and covering himself, he is speaking in Pitjantjatjara, which I thought was very cool and nowhere else in the world would you see that!

Mercedes Roetman is in her 4th year of a Bachelor of Indigenous Studies at the University of New

TOPICS

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