

**ACTOR-TRAINING IN AUSTRALIA AND THE INDIGENOUS STUDENT
EXPERIENCE: TRAVERSING CULTURAL AND PEDAGOGICAL DOMAINS**

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Arts.

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2012

Acknowledgments

I would firstly like to thank my supervisors from the Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, Dr Laura Ginters, and Dr Paul Dwyer. I would also like to thank the Performance Studies Department staff and postgraduate students for their assistance in listening to various draft chapters, as well as the staff from the Koori Centre for their support, plus two important people, Dr Gordon Beattie and Dr Anne Marshall for their time. Thanks, too, to Janet Hutchinson, Nea Cahill, and to Kim Spinks for proofing drafts of this thesis.

Secondly, I express my gratitude to all the graduates, teachers and staff interviewed, plus all those who also gave of their time and thoughts so generously: Vernon Ah Kee, Carmen Attel, Michelle Blanchard, Rick Brayford, Daniel Browning, Leanne Buckskin, Leon Burchill, Sam Cook, Frederick Copperwaite, Wesley Enoch, Jason Eades, Michelle Evans, Ben Graetz, Darryl Griffen, Nick Hills, Kevin Jackson, Andrea James, Sonny Dallas Law, Marilyn Miller, Jacqueline Mills, Jadah Plieter (Milroy), Janet Mooney, Penny Mullen, Richard Murphett, Rene Recko, Lily Shearer, Maitland Shnaars, Kim Spinks, Shakara Walley, Julie Warne, and Lynnette Williams.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends, my partner, and my family for all their patience, love and support.

Abstract

There is a diverse range of formal, institutional training opportunities for Indigenous students who aspire to a career in acting. However, it is not only the technical aspects of training that differ from Aboriginal-identified and mainstream programs—indeed, in this respect, the similarities seem more striking than the differences. Of far greater importance, as I argue in this thesis, are the differences in cultural context from one institution to another. One question this thesis examines is whether there are critical differences between the experiences of Indigenous students at mainstream and Aboriginal-identified institutions. Whatever institution they attend, the way in which Indigenous acting students experience, and make sense of, their training does not depend so much on the specific content or structure of classroom and studio-based learning activities; rather, it is essentially defined by the much larger cultural and pedagogical frameworks within which these learning activities are embedded. In other words, the experience of actor training, for Indigenous students, involves a constant, subtle negotiation of differing expectations, or assumptions, around issues of identity, culture, family, professionalism, and so on. Further questions this thesis investigates include when, where and how do Indigenous students engage meaningfully or critically with these particular issues, especially culture, during the course of their vocational training. Also, how do institutions support students to navigate these issues?

My approach to answering these questions is to describe and analyse the manner in which Indigenous students navigate these potentially fraught negotiations and to draw

out some of the lessons to be learned—by teachers and administrators in training institutions, by theatre companies, funding bodies, and policy makers—from focusing more closely on these students’ experiences. My research is informed by in-depth interviews conducted with Indigenous graduates from a selection of different actor-training programs, some of which are very strongly, and historically, “Aboriginal-identified” programs and some of which are offered by “mainstream” institutions. In many cases, the Indigenous theatre makers I interviewed had experienced training in both Aboriginal-identified and mainstream settings, so they were able to offer very insightful cross-institutional perspectives. Acknowledging, however, that the student experience in any pedagogical encounter is never independent of the teacher experience, I also conducted several in-depth interviews with teachers, directors and other staff from the actor-training programs. At no point was the research seeking a single understanding of the “right” way of training Indigenous actors. Rather, the thesis sets out to illuminate multiple perspectives on the topic. It is an investigation of localised experiences, or local narratives about those who inhabit, in some cases only briefly, the often tightly bound, intense, “hidden worlds” of actor training.

This thesis suggests that no matter how idiosyncratic or special the “culture” that has developed within any given institution, there are still multiple ways in which that small-c institutional culture is being reframed, reinterpreted, possibly even restructured, by the big-C “Cultural” frameworks within which students make sense of their lives.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I expected to learn about the basic acting skills. I also expected to learn about Aboriginal history in the performing arts. I also wanted to learn more about my culture and my people in general. Being an Indigenous performer it was important for me to learn my history, the Aboriginal history in performing arts, and the people who have gone before me, my role models. I believe that Indigenous storytelling and performance is a lot different to the so-called mainstream performing arts practice.¹

The focus of this research

At the outset of this thesis I would like to identify myself as a descendant of the Birripi (also spelt Biripai) and Worromi people of the mid north coast of NSW (Taree, Foster, Tuncurry). My father's family has a strong connection to these custodial lands despite being moved to the Purfleet Aboriginal Reserve in the early 1900's, and having lived and worked in the Sydney metropolitan area since the 1930's. I am a member of the Sydney Metropolitan Land Council. My mother's family heritage includes the first fleet Irish convict Henry Kable. My Aboriginal heritage is relevant to this research project in that my experiences as an identified Aboriginal person has provided me with some intimate insights into the way Culture, identity, and also family contribute to the

¹ In interview with Sonny Dallas Law, 7 January 2010, Redfern, Sydney.

working practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance makers and actors I have worked with. It is these experiences that drive the ideas that inform this thesis.

Over the last ten years I worked as an acting teacher at the Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts, in Redfern, Sydney. Sonny Dallas Law, an Indigenous graduate of Eora whose words I quote above, is a Wakka Wakka man from southern Queensland. I was pleased when Law told me in this interview that he came to study acting at Eora because he wanted to know more about “[his] history, the Aboriginal history in performing arts”. He also told me that while studying at Eora he was reminded of this performance history and his heritage on a daily basis. Then the interview took what might seem a slightly odd turn: Law told me he felt all this knowledge was important because when he graduated into what he called “the mainstream world”, he was going to tell his stories, from his Culture and his experiences, in a form that he described as “mainstream with a twist”.² In labelling his ambitions this way, Law appeared to be identifying “the mainstream” as a knowable set of dominant practices to which, at best, an “Aboriginal twist” can be added. This was not what I had hoped would be the outcome of Law’s training at Eora. What had gone wrong? Why wasn’t he at least imagining the possibility of “Aboriginal with a twist of mainstream”?

It is, of course, difficult to know exactly how a student’s experience of actor-training will inform their performances in the years following graduation. However,

² For reasons which I will explain more fully below, “Culture” is written here with a big “C” to designate a larger sense of heritage, belonging and commitment that Law refers to.

many well-established Indigenous theatre practitioners insist that Culture is at the heart of their practice. The key questions that this thesis investigates are as follows. When, where and how are Indigenous students able to engage meaningfully or critically with Culture during the course of their vocational training? Are there critical differences between the experiences of students at mainstream and Aboriginal-identified institutions? How do institutions support students who, like their Indigenous role models in the performing arts, see Culture as a key resource in their approach to making theatre?

Of course, students are negotiating a great variety of different cultural experiences all the time—interactions shaped by previous training and educational experiences, by understandings of professional identity, by assumptions about ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social hierarchies in the workplace and so on. However, these micro-level interactions do take place within a wider cultural and pedagogical framework that is relatively specific to the training institution concerned. For Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs, the assumptions underpinning this wider cultural and pedagogical framework tend to be quite explicit, while those underpinning the training in mainstream institutions are mostly implicit. A socio-political analysis of different institutional histories can certainly help shed light on the intrinsic cultural assumptions informing the extrinsic pedagogy of each actor-training context. While this thesis does include some of this socio-political analysis, my key focus is on the way past students describe and, in so doing, give meaning to their lived experience of training.

The reason for tacking back and forth between socio-political analysis of

institutional histories and close readings of what graduates (and their teachers) say about their training experiences is to maintain a balance between, on the one hand, the structures which enable or constrain engagement with Culture and, on the other hand, the creative agency of Indigenous students who find ways of working within these structures. Looking again at the case of Law, for example, the dominant position of mainstream theatre institutions clearly has exerted an influence on the way in which this recent graduate thinks about his career prospects as an actor, but it would be overstating this influence to suggest that he is merely a puppet of the “system”. Law has already spent many years skillfully navigating different cultural frameworks. Like other Indigenous students, as a result of Australia’s colonial history, he came into theatre training having already learned to live in two worlds. And if he does follow the example of his Aboriginal role models in the performing arts, he may well find ways of shifting what passes for mainstream theatre practice (even if the pace of change is slower than his former teacher was hoping for!).

Important opportunities also continue to exist outside formal performing arts institutions for Indigenous people to celebrate and perform Culture and identity. Nevertheless, given the continuing significance of Culture for both established and emerging Indigenous theatre practitioners, it is appropriate to ask where (or if) such possibilities exist within the institutions that offer formal training, how they arise (or might be introduced), what they mean (or could mean) for both the institutions and the students themselves, and then what potential exists for aspiring Indigenous students at training institutions to engage with Culture.

“Crappy little words”: terminology, language, concepts and their meaning

It's generally accepted that as Indigenous artists we have to agree on terms to facilitate discourse about our work.³

Already in the opening paragraphs above, and throughout the rest of this thesis, the nature of this research project demands that I use a number of terms whose meanings are heavily contested. What follows in this section is an attempt to make as clear as possible what I mean when I use terms like “Culture/culture”, “Aboriginal/Indigenous”, “contemporary/traditional” etc. I must admit at the outset, however, that I have sometimes struggled with the “political correctness” of using specific terms and concepts to describe myself and my “community” (another contested term!). As an identified Aboriginal woman, a descendant of the Birripi and Worromi people of northern NSW, I have not only an obligation to engage with certain issues around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in appropriate ways, I also have a responsibility to follow protocols on the use of particular terms. However, these rules sometimes appear quite arbitrary since it is not always clear who has the authority to define or make changes to them. A diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices exists nationally such that no one idiom dominates another, nor is any one practice followed by all Aboriginal people. Hence, the terms I use are not definitive. They will change—indeed, they have changed even during the course of writing this thesis—and some may become redundant or outdated in a few years.

³ Wesley Enoch at *IndigeLab* October 2010. Bundanon, NSW.

This lack of stability in regard to terms and definitions is obviously sometimes frustrating but it also suggests that something important is at stake. Raymond Williams argues in his famous introduction to some “keywords” of cultural analysis, “the problems of [their] meanings [seem] inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] being used to discuss” (1981, p. 15). Or, as the Indigenous theatre director, Wesley Enoch, recently put it, “we use ‘crappy little words’ to explain big concepts and rely on assumed understandings”. Wesley’s comment was made in the course of *IndigeLab 2010*, a two-week residential workshop for a small group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance makers who came together to discuss critical issues within their practice.⁴ The words we listed and debated at Wesley’s prompting are not “crappy” in themselves, of course; like Williams’ “keywords”, they are quite powerful terms that contain loaded meanings, a system of symbols that needs to be constructed and reconstructed again and again.

One of the reasons why terms are problematic in Indigenous arts practice is that this process of definition and redefinition develops according to different frameworks, some of them intrinsic to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and some of them extrinsic (originating in the mainstream). Terms mean different things to different sections of society, depending on where and how they are used. Wesley Enoch argues that our “crappy little words” can be both limiting, when people don’t know what we mean when they are used, and delimiting, when other people regulate the usage of

⁴ Initiated by Performance Space Sydney and Lily Shearer (Indigenous performance broker in 2007), *IndigeLab* has held three programs; the third, which I attended, occurred in October 2010. The residency takes place at Bundanon on the south coast of NSW. Bequeathed to the Australian Government in 1993, Bundanon, now an artist-in-residency program, once belonged to the Boyd family, famous for their contribution to the visual arts sector in Australia. At Riversdale on the property, an education centre designed by architect Glenn Murcutt is perched overlooking the Shoalhaven River. There for eight days, ten of us considered the discourse that currently surrounds Indigenous arts practices in Australia, in particular issues of culture and identity.

terms. He offers an example of the former: “I asked a group what we meant by ‘blackfella’ and the response was ...“We know what we mean: blackfella as in blackfella”.⁵

Language here is used politically, as that which both includes and excludes. If you don’t know what this group means by the term “blackfella” then you obviously do not belong to this group, nor to a possibly much larger community of people with which this particular group identifies. I too have at times struggled, within an academic context, to articulate the meaning of words that circulate among “insiders” in an Indigenous cultural framework. Partly, this is because I have come to know particular terms in an informal way, as a normal part of daily activities. For insiders, these terms relate to what the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, refers to as an “experience-near” understanding of cultural practices. An experience-near concept is, “roughly, one which an individual—a patient, a subject, in our case an informant—might himself [*sic*] naturally and effortlessly use to define what he [*sic*] or his [*sic*] fellows see, feel, think, imagine and so on, and which he [*sic*] would readily understand when similarly applied to others” (Geertz, 1983, p. 57). It is, as Geertz suggests, “how we describe our life-world spontaneously, unselfconsciously, as it were, colloquially” (1983, p. 58).

It was not until I was asked to describe what certain terms mean from an insider’s perspective that I started to consider how my understanding of them might be different to the way others, from outside of the community in which I live and work, use and understand them. Thus, at times, to help explain this insider’s perspective, I have had to use what Geertz calls an “experience-distant” concept, “one which various

⁵ Wesley Enoch at *Indigelab* October 2010. Bundanon, NSW

types of specialists, an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist employ to forward their scientific philosophical, or practical aims” (1983, p. 57).

Geertz argues that the difference between experience-near and experience-distant concepts is “one of degree, not polar opposition” and that, in his view as an anthropologist, “the difference is not [...] a normative one, in the sense that one sort of concept is to be preferred as such over the other” (1983, p. 57). In fact, for Geertz, to interpret any cultural practice requires both types of conceptual frames: “Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him [*sic*] stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon” (1983, p. 57). Again, the difficulty here is that what is experience-near from one group’s perspective can be very experience-distant from the perspective of another group (even when the exact same terms are being used to describe these experiences). Also, terms are often imposed by one group on another group. The term “Aboriginal”, for example, is one of the most contested terms in Australia. It is a socio-political construct (an experience-distant concept) that non-Indigenous people sometimes use to describe a group of people who are the original inhabitants of Australia. However, it can also be used in a very present, subjective (experience-near) manner, as in “I am Aboriginal”. And just what the term might mean for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in a cross-cultural conversation is far from obvious.

Having suggested the complexities that make it impossible to permanently “lock in” any of the definitions that follow, I should add one last warning. The order in

which I discuss these key “crappy little words” is also somewhat arbitrary: from an Indigenous perspective, they are all such closely intertwined terms that any ordering necessarily involves an artificial separation. Hopefully, the following broad definitions can still serve to suggest the issues at stake in the rest of this thesis. I will refer to the work of various scholars in performance studies, as well as providing what I understand to be the current consensus among my Indigenous mentors, elders and peers, including those involved in the *IndigeLab* workshops.

Culture

I begin with a critical examination of the term “culture”, described by Williams as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1981, p. 87). It is certainly a word that has to do a lot of conceptual work, covering not only the processes and products of the so-called cultural industries such as—theatre, dance, visual arts, and music (although, of course, these genre distinctions are often irrelevant in the context of Aboriginal performing arts)—but also the normal experiences of daily life and what I have already referred to above as “big-C Culture”. The following discussion starts with some influential definitions in the academic field of performance studies, then draws on my own investigation of how the term culture is used and what it seems to mean for professionals within the Aboriginal arts and cultural sector.

Performance studies, as a research paradigm, draws on a multiplicity of other disciplines. Gay McAuley, for instance, refers to its borrowings from “anthropology, ethnography, sociology, history, linguistics, psychoanalysis, gender studies, politics and cultural studies, not to mention theatre studies, art history and theory, film, dance

and media studies” (2001, p. 6). Peggy Phelan asserts that research into performance has also come to combine methodological approaches in critical theory, literature studies, folklore, anthropology, post-colonial theory, and feminist and queer studies (1998, p. 4). For Richard Schechner, this interdisciplinarity of performance studies is a key virtue since it opens up areas of investigation where theories collide to create new methods of investigation (1998, p. 361). Yet, the need for a clearer definition of culture—and its relation to performance—remains.

For my purposes in this thesis, the performance studies scholar, Ian Watson, has provided the most useful general definition of culture. For Watson, “[c]ulture is a holistic complex, with an interrelated palimpsest of determinants which comprehends, among other things, socio-historical identity, mytho-religious belief systems, kinship, rituals, ethnicity, national heritage, value systems, various modes of creative expression, as well as social behaviour” (2002, p. 2). Like Watson, I recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture operates within a much larger socio-historical identity, which also includes mytho-religious belief systems maintaining aspects of kinship and ritual, together with ethnicity, national heritage, value systems, various modes of creative expression and particular social codes.

Importantly, performance studies theorists have emphasised the role of performance as the medium through which culture is enacted, negotiated and constantly re-made. As Watson argues in a later work, on the problematic of culture in performance training: “[c]ulture shares much with performance because it is a living entity embedded in enactment” (2003, p. 33). He also adds that “[w]e learn our culture, its mores, its values, its history through our contact with it” (p. 34). I agree with

Watson on this point and, as detailed below, this perspective on culture is broadly similar to the way Indigenous participants at *IndigeLab* 2010 view it.

For Richard Schechner, too, culture is expressed through enactment: “[c]ultures are the most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances” (1990, p. 1). This is echoed by Kirsten Hastrup who also takes an anthropological view of performance, arguing that most “cultural knowledge is stored in actions rather than in words” (1995, p. 82). Phillip Zarrilli, however, makes an important addition to the point being made by Watson, Schechner and Hastrup when he states that “performance as a mode of cultural action is not a simple reflection of some essentialised fixed attributes of a static, monolithic culture but an arena for the constant process of renegotiating experiences and meanings that constitute culture” (1995, p. 16).

Another important influence on my thinking in this thesis has been the work of Clifford Geertz, whom I have already cited above. In his book, *The Interpretation of Culture*, Geertz famously describes culture as a human creation, “[a] system of symbols by which man [*sic*] confers significance upon his [*sic*] own experience” (1973, p. 250). However, Geertz seems reluctant here to connect culture with the question of power. He asserts that culture is not a power in itself, in the sense of “something to which social events, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed” (1973, p.14). Rather, the concept of culture he adopts is “essentially a semiotic one [in which] man [*sic*] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he [*sic*] has spun” (1973, p. 5). Geertz’s metaphor of a web seems highly appropriate but institutions (such as the actor-training organisations that are the subject of this thesis) obviously

are powerful and do play a huge role in determining what webs will be woven and who gets to weave them. Institutions reproduce the web. They are where the weaving processes take place. That process is instructional. Culture informs what web will be woven.

Writing about actor-training institutions in the United States of America, Watson argues that they tend to reproduce an understanding of culture as “constructed from multifarious influences, which owes little allegiance to any one country,” (2003, p. 40). It is a culture not specified: one that is shaped by broad societal understandings, rather than something of deep significance to a particular group of people. This is what I refer to as, lower case “c” culture, as does Watson (2003, p. 40). The emphasis for students in this kind of training environment is on instilling a particular sense of professional identity and technical mastery. The assumption underpinning the training that Watson describes seems to be that the specific cultural backgrounds of the trainees are largely irrelevant to this process of “skills transfer”.

This is a very different attitude to the one displayed by the Indigenous participants at *IndigeLab* 2010. When I asked them to consider the question “What is Culture?”, it became very quickly clear that they perceived culture far more as a capital ‘C’ phenomenon, one constructed from within a specific group of people who articulate its particular meaning. The following responses are typical of this line of thinking:

For me Culture is the manifestation of the shared values of a group of people. (Wesley Enoch)

I can only draw upon Culture in the context of my own cultural background and heritage, which is being an Aboriginal person. My culture is defined by my lineage. (Lee-Anne Buckskin)

Culture means different things to different people. Even in the context of being Aboriginal it means different things to different people. (Jason Eades)

Culture is who we are all the time. (Vernon Ah Kee)

From these interviews and the discussions that followed I have come to understand that the term Culture is seen in different ways, but specifically as that which contributes to what it means to be Aboriginal. Aboriginal people do not think about Culture in reductive terms. Rather, it is perceived both as something intrinsically subjective, and as something very broad at the same time. It is experience-near in that it is how we describe ourselves spontaneously, unselfconsciously and colloquially. It is also experience-far in that the term is used to convey the socialised system of one particular community or individual from another community or individual within the same culture. We engage with locations of Culture at various times depending on whose country or community we encounter. We experience Culture, language, customs

and values when in contact with each other. Our understanding of Culture is constructed from these experiences. Hence I use the capitalised term Culture throughout this thesis to denote an Indigenous understanding of this term. It is Culture defined both intrinsically, as that which is readily understood by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when applied by others, and as that employed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with others outside of a particular locality, but which is specific to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

Contemporary/traditional Culture

Both “contemporary” and “traditional” are terms used to describe Culture in a temporal sense, but the relation between the practices to which these adjectives are applied is complex. Contemporary, as a temporal descriptor, obviously means “of the same time” or “(relatively) close to the present date”. Often it is assumed that contemporary and traditional practices are opposites but in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander usages, it also makes sense to think of practices as “contemporary” when they involve the reframing, reinterpretation, and possibly even the reconstruction of ancestral or “traditional” Cultural material. Furthermore, I suggest that all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Cultural works performed today could be perceived as contemporary regardless of how they are performed or what Cultural material they contain.

When the term “traditional” is used more restrictively, for instance when it mostly refers only to practices, objects and cultural materials that pre-date colonisation, the risk is that this usage promotes a “museum view” of Indigenous Culture and materials and emphasizes rupture, not continuity, with the present. For many

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, time is not experienced with the same sense of linearity that it has for most non-Indigenous people. In other words, traditions are living and “contemporary” for those who engage with them. Although I will sometimes use the adjective “traditional” in this thesis to represent a set of Cultural practices and beliefs that belong to a time before colonisation, I do so in the knowledge that such forms, Culture and beliefs continue to be practiced today. And, for want of a better word in English, I will also sometimes use the term “contemporary” to describe forms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are engaging with at the present time. In such instances, I will be referring to forms that contain traces of “traditional” Cultural practices, or that have also been informed by non-Indigenous styles, modes and forms. I only do this because the discourse on and about Indigenous theatre practice is mostly framed as such, as a way of marking the differences between the contemporary and traditional.

Community

“Community”, as I hinted earlier, is another difficult and increasingly contested term, no longer inspiring the feelings of rosy consensus and social cohesion that it still seemed to promise when Raymond Williams included it among his “keywords”. As I have argued elsewhere, the notion of community is now “notoriously difficult to define” (Dwyer and Syron, 2009, p. 177). It has both positive and negative connotations. It can be seen as both inclusive and exclusive, both in geographical terms and ideologically. While the term “community” is often deployed strategically and ideologically (for instance in debates about law and order or in the health, education

and welfare sectors) as a way of recruiting people to a particular planning or policy agenda, it does not have to be used simply as a vague marker, as a kind of discursive “space” where competing histories and ideologies circulate. It can also serve as a reminder of the need to engage with the day-to-day “reality of persons living in place” (Dwyer and Syron, 2009, p. 177). Certainly, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the term ‘community’ has come to mean, in contemporary society, both “place” and “space”.

As McAuley argues, in trying to reconcile notions of “space” in disciplines like theatre studies with phenomenological theories of “place”, “space” is not a “neutral container for actions, events and experiences but has to be seen as a dynamic player, requiring detailed analysis of its role in the complex weave linking society, culture and history” (2006, p. 15). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, “community” has come to denote not only “place” (geography and dwelling), but also a collective term where different Cultures, memories, histories, and identities can co-exist. Hence, throughout this thesis, I will use the term “community” to denote both the “space” where Aboriginal people store memories about a “place”, and the actual place where they reside. For example, when I talk about “the Aboriginal community” I denote a space of no geographical locality. Instead it is the space where a collective of ideas about Aboriginality is “housed”. This space is situated outside, but exists alongside, specific localities. When I want to denote a greater specificity of place, then I will name the particular locality concerned, as in the “Redfern Aboriginal Community”.

Indigenous/Aboriginal/Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

While I have, unavoidably, already been using these widespread but not-so-straight forward terms, I now need to clarify how they are understood, both by the community in which I live and work, and by my Aboriginal peers and elders. I will also note some contrasts between these usages and the way the terms are used by others, and how I use them throughout this thesis. Each term has its own history and purpose and, while they are sometimes used interchangeably, this is often misleading.

Indigenous

This is a term that often represents first nations people all over the world, for example in such international forums as the United Nations. In these contexts, the term provides a focus for discussions of political issues, policy proposals and social/cultural trends that pertain to all Indigenous peoples. The term does not take into consideration specific or significant differences in social, cultural and linguistic customs among various Indigenous groups of the world, nor, in the local Australian context, does it prompt consideration of any variations within and across different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups. In this thesis, I will sometimes use the word “Indigenous” to denote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, considered as a whole, when no specific details of cultural or geographical location are being singled out for discussion. However, given that most of my thesis research is reporting on the experiences of Aboriginal people in particular, the term “Indigenous” will only be used sparingly.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

I use the term “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” when focusing on aspects of a collective experience common to many first Nations peoples. This more specific, but still broadly inclusive, phrase takes in the Torres Strait Islander people of the northern tip of Australia who are the original inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands. They are geographically, culturally, and ethnically different to Aboriginal people. The Torres Strait is an archipelago that consists of over 274 small islands between Papua New Guinea and Cape York Peninsula. The people of these islands practice many customs influenced by other island cultures throughout the Pacific region, but in 1901 they became Australians after the Torres Strait Islands were annexed under a law implemented by the newly federated Commonwealth. The term Aboriginal, on the other hand, generally refers to the first people of Australia, and who inhabit the majority of the country including post-colonial territories.

The word Aboriginal is still interpreted in many ways, with some notable differences between the usages of non-Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal people themselves. For example, one well-known online dictionary defines “aboriginal” as: “A dark skinned member of a race of people living in Australia when Europeans arrived”.⁶ For the 1985 edition of the *Chambers Dictionary*, the word “aboriginal” denotes “the earliest, primitive, indigenous – *n* (often with *cap*)” (p. 2). Similarly, but without the reference to “primitive” existence, the Macquarie Online Dictionary offers the following definitions of “aboriginal”:

⁶ Found in “The Free Dictionary” URL: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/aborigine>.

noun 1. one of the first inhabitants of a country; one of the people living in a country at the earliest known period.

2. (*plural*) *Rare* the original fauna or flora of a region. [19th century; back formation from the plural *aborigines*, from Latin *Aborigines*, the pre-Roman inhabitants of Latium, an ancient country in Italy, literally, (inhabitants) *aborigine* from the beginning]” (Macmillan Publishers, 2010).

The use of lower case “aboriginal” in these publications can, of course, be used to refer to Indigenous people from places other than Australia. The debate about the word Aboriginal focuses on its use as an adjective to describe a person rather than as a noun or a proper noun to describe specificity of race and nationality. When referring to Aboriginal people, the generic term “the Aborigines” is still often used. Of course, in the not-too-distant past, terms that would define a person’s quantity of Aboriginality (such as “full-blood”, “half-caste”, “quadroon” or “octoroon”) were also used and were, indeed, enshrined in law.

Today, by contrast, as Marcia Langton argues, understandings about what and who is Aboriginal in Australia are located somewhere between the individual and the state (1993, p. 28). In State legislation as in the NSW *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*, “Aboriginal” means a person who: “(a) is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, (b) identifies as an Aboriginal, and (c) is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal” The Commonwealth in the 1980s included this definition in the *Aboriginal Development Commission Act 1980*, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait*

Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984, and the Aboriginal Land Grant (Jervis Bay Territory) Territory Act 1986.

Langton also suggests that Aboriginality is a shifting experience that is made and remade over and over in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation (1993, p. 33). Further, she argues that there exist “three broad categories of Cultural and textual construction of Aboriginality” (1993, p. 34). The first is that which takes place between Aboriginal people interacting with Aboriginal people largely within Aboriginal communities. Secondly she proposes that the construction of things Aboriginal is not so much made in dialogue but is, instead, inherited (often via imagined representations of Aboriginality). Thirdly, she writes of an Aboriginal identity that can be constructed from a more genuine dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. For Langton, Aboriginality is located somewhere between these three areas of contact. However, what is understood as Aboriginal between Aboriginal people will be different from understandings negotiated between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Further, an imagined Aboriginality will always be constantly contested through these contacts.

I use the term Aboriginal in the context of this thesis as a proper noun to denote a specificity of geography, heritage, culture and identity. I also construct my notion of Aboriginal based on the accepted and agreed upon definition outlined by the Commonwealth government, and as that articulated by Aboriginal people as that pertaining to Aboriginal.

I will use the term Aboriginal to describe the actor-training programs I overview in this thesis. This is because I do not review any specific Torres Strait

Islander programs. And, although I acknowledge that in Australia, and in particular Queensland, many communities are made up of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, I define these programs primarily by their locality.

While, as stated above, I will also sometimes use the phrase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, I have avoided the acronym ATSI. Among my peer group, it is felt that this usage of ATSI emerged as people got tired of writing the phrase “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” in its entirety. It is currently considered lazy and disrespectful to use the acronym by the community in which I live, which means there is current debate by some sections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who call for the reinstatement and usage of the whole name in any printed document.

So, to summarise, I use the term Indigenous to describe non-specific Cultural and geographical locations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or people across Australia. To state identifiable regions, Cultures, and or peoples, I use the term Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander as appropriate. Where possible, I name the traditional title of a person’s country and/or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander name of a person’s community. For example; Wesley Enoch is a Noonuccal Nuugi man from Queensland (Murri). Noonuccal Nuugi is Wesley’s traditional community, and he is also referred to in a contemporary sense as a Murri, an Aboriginal person from Queensland.

Identity: a lived, and shifting, personal experience

Lawrence Grossberg states: “Identities are always relational and incomplete, in process” (1996, p. 86). He goes on to say that:

Identity is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations, which define identities by marking differences. The emphasis here is on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a singular identity and on the connections or articulations between fragments or differences (1996, p. 89).

This statement rings true for me and, as a way of putting more flesh on the bones of the definitions offered above—but also in order to explain more about the genesis of some core concerns of this thesis—I will describe my own experience of the identity effects to which Grossberg refers.

My identity as an Aboriginal person constantly shifts between uncertainty and certainty depending on which context or cultural framework I engage with. In mainstream Australian culture, my identity is a contested one. Ideas about who is Aboriginal and who is not in this context are often based on the fantasy of a “true” or “authentic” identity. Urban Indigenous identities are often perceived as being in opposition to this fantasy. I know that the name of my Aboriginal community is Birripi. I know my clan totem is a shark. I know this because my family taught me this. My Aboriginality is recognised by the local Aboriginal Land Council, and by the community in which I work. I therefore use the term “identity” throughout this thesis

to denote an Indigenous identity primarily informed by an Indigenous cultural framework unless otherwise stated. Still, my own identity as an identified Aboriginal person is a shifting concept. It is continually contested, constructed over and over again depending on what context I am engaged with. Yet it is a constant throughout my life.

The word “identity”, for Enoch, refers to a sense of being secure in yourself about your “Aboriginality”.⁷ In an Aboriginal society, identity is about knowing where your family comes from. There is an expectation that you can recite your clan/tribal lineage and or your family tree. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is also performative. In some Indigenous cultures, if you can’t or won’t display it you are considered to be lacking in your identity. You are accused of being ashamed of it, or not worthy of claiming it. For me, the journey towards my identity is revealing of the complexity of what it is not only to be Aboriginal, but what it is to be an Aboriginal actor and performer.

I came to my identity as a person of Aboriginal descent in 1979 when I was sixteen. I lived in Balmain, an inner suburb of Sydney. It was in that year that my father 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”.⁸ Like Horace, who was forty-nine at the time of his death, my father Frederick George Kenny, was also a descendant of the Birripi (also spelt Biripai) people of Taree in northern NSW. He was thirty-eight when he succumbed to angina.

⁷ Wesley Enoch at *InidgeLab* October 2010. Bundanon, NSW.

⁸ Erin O’Dwyer, “Spirit of a big-hearted fisherman still lingers close to shore,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 2005. URL: www.smh.com.au/news/National/Spirit-of-a-bighearted-fisherman-still-lingers-close-to-shore/2005/06/04/1117825105813.html .

My father's uncle, Brian Syron, came to visit me not long after the funeral. 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 brought home a letterbox covered in red, black and yellow stripes and emblazoned with a shield and spear, a gift from his mates at the Electricity Commission. My two sisters and I sat staring, wondering 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. Before 1967 Aboriginal people did not have citizenship rights and were constitutionally equivalent to ‘flora and fauna’. Less than ten years after the 1967 Australian referendum on constitutional change to include Aboriginal people in the census, attitudes towards “Aboriginality” did began to change, including those of my mother.

Brian told me that “they” (I thought he meant Aboriginal people) 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 discuss this policy in more

detail later in this thesis. 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”.⁹ 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. These programs I discuss in more detail later.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s Brian had held acting classes in a small studio on William Street in Darlinghurst, Sydney. He boasted such students as Helen Morse, John Hargreaves, Lydia Miller, Ernie Dingo and Rhoda Roberts. Brian’s specialty was the “American Method”. He had spent many years studying under Stella Adler at her New York City school during the late 1960s. My relationship with Brian was quite often strained 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 position in the three year acting stream at VCA. I auditioned not because I knew I wanted to be an actor; it was more that I wanted to learn to do something I felt I was good at. I felt I could act, and it seemed that others felt I could too. Perhaps I was motivated by my uncle’s involvement in the performing arts and the possibility that I could be part of that life

⁹ Wesley Enoch speaking at the launch of *Your Genre is Black* by Currency House, June 2010, at the National Institute of Dramatic Art, Sydney.

too. After all, it did set him apart from his peers. In some ways, I just wanted to improve my prospects. As Cindy Birdwick stated recently at the University of Sydney inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Scholarship award night, “Education is the vehicle to get out of poverty [for Aboriginal people]”.¹⁰ I can say that the policies of the day assisted me in achieving my aims. Having received the initial support to complete my HSC, I was eligible for further study.

While at drama school from 1987 to 1990 I did not identify as a person of Aboriginal heritage. It is not always apparent that I am Aboriginal. I am not embarrassed by my heritage, nor do I hide it. At VCA, however, it was more a matter of it not seeming 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 discuss, and participate in, my Aboriginality. My Aboriginality seemed something thinly veiled. Further, in retrospect, when thinking about the course, at the time Aboriginal theatre and history played no significant part for me 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 Melbourne in various professional roles in musical theatre, puppetry and in television. However, on my return to Sydney in 1993 my identity as an actor suddenly changed. In Sydney I found myself an agent, who on account of my name immediately connected me to Brian. I then became framed by my heritage. I had a tick-a-box identity: Aboriginal.

In “Casting Doubts” (2002), playwright Maryanne Sam wrote about this very issue, examining the role of Aboriginality in a broader cultural context of the

¹⁰ Cindy Birdwick is the President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, an Indigenous community advisory body to state and federal government departments. The award night took place on 5 November 2009 at MacLaurin Hall, University of Sydney.

Australian entertainment industry. The play centers 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. (Sam, 2002, p. 146)

Although a fictitious account, much of what the play examines resonates for me. In my case I was 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 because I did not know what it meant to be an 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 Morris. Morris is most famous for her stage adaptation of Morris Gleitzman’s book *Two Weeks with the Queen*. *Shark Island Stories* was an adaptation of *The Flying Emu and other Stories* by Aboriginal writer Sally Morgan. Noongar professional contemporary dancer Michael Leslie was involved in the choreography; Bronwyn Bancroft, a Bundjalung woman, 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 actor 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 1970s. 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 brown Afro. It was Justine Saunders, a Woppaburra woman from Queensland, and she was naked. 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. 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 because of the skills and training I received during my time at VCA. But coming into the *Shark Island Stories* 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 present my own experiences, as limited as it was. From this encounter a new sense of belonging emerged. I felt that slowly my place in the production was clearer, not for the producers, but for the Aboriginal cast. The members of *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.

This was a defining moment. I came to know more about what it meant to be an Aboriginal actor in contact with other Aboriginal actors and performers. I would argue that similar experiences also occur for most Indigenous actors when in the presence of other Indigenous people in a theatrical context. This encounter will be different for each individual, and different in each context. Similarly, as Marvin Carlson in *Performance a Critical Introduction* (2004) notes that, “individual identity is of course developed within and operates within specific cultural contexts” (p. 178). So too, in the acting jobs that followed, I worked in similar ways with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors and performers. The exchanges that took place between myself and other Aboriginal performers, centered mostly on the sharing of knowledge of Culture, and on Aboriginality in performance practice.

The *Shark Island Stories* experience remained with me, suspended in memory for many years until my appointment as theatre coordinator at the Eora College of Aboriginal Education, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts in Redfern Sydney (Eora). Although the performance program offered at Eora did not contain the words “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture” within the course outline, a point I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, I knew I had an obligation to reflect on the experiences that I had been exposed to. I needed to examine further what these experiences meant, this time in the context of a training institute. At Eora the majority of students and teachers are Aboriginal. My position at Eora was an identified one.¹¹ My identity was present due to: my self-identification, the recognition of my Aboriginality from other Aboriginal people, and the opportunities I was given to

¹¹ “Aboriginality” is a genuine occupational qualification and is authorised by section 14 (126) of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act 1977.

engage with Culture through dialogue. Aboriginality is also constructed over and over with every encounter among Indigenous students, among teachers, and among Indigenous students and teachers. These same experiences, I argue, also take place in the context of contemporary Indigenous performance practice. In this context the complexities of being Aboriginal, of knowing community, and knowledge of Culture and heritage are also exchanged between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors and theatre makers. These aspects of Aboriginal life also contribute to an understanding of what it is to be an Aboriginal actor. In the second half of this thesis I will examine these points in more detail.

Structure of the thesis

I will now outline the chapters that follow and how they contribute to investigating the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter. At the beginning of Chapter 1, I stated that the similarities between the mainstream and the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs (examined in this thesis) are more striking than differences. This is due in part to the overarching educational framework in Australia. I will also argue that the different training contexts (Aboriginal-identified and mainstream) are also influenced by more specific cultural frameworks, which are sometimes explicit, while at other times implicit.

In Chapter 2, I outline, through current approaches in theoretical discourse (especially in the area of performance studies), a methodology for examining these different cultural frameworks. I also discuss the methodology I employed to examine the Indigenous student experiences of training to be an actor.

In Chapter 3, I investigate what circumstances guided the establishment of institutionalised actor-training in Australia and principles underpinned this direction. This section includes a brief historical overview of the three mainstream actor-training programs examined in this thesis: the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). In much the same way that Chapter 3 begins, I then embark on exploring what led to the rise of the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs nationally, and these include; the Eora College of Aboriginal Studies Centre for Visual and Performing Arts (Eora College), the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA) and the Aboriginal Theatre course run out of WAAPA at Edith Cowan University in Perth. These Aboriginal programs sit not only within a broader Australian educational framework, they also, as I will argue, have emerged from a wider socio-political context that relates specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples nationally, and Indigenous peoples globally.

In Chapter 4, I provide an overview of the local and international influences that contributed to, and provided the impetus for, the emergence of an identifiable Aboriginal educational context in Australia. This chapter encapsulates the rationale behind Aboriginal specific schools, programs, and policy in Australia.

In the second half of this thesis I present the findings from the interviews undertaken as part of this thesis. The focus of Chapter 5 is on investigating the key questions of where opportunities exist, and how opportunities arise to engage with Culture for Indigenous students during their training to be an actor. More importantly, I will examine how actor-training institutions support (or not) students

who, like their Indigenous role models in the performing arts, see Culture as a key resource in their approach to making theatre. I will argue that an engagement with Culture, for Indigenous-and sometimes non-Indigenous students, mostly occurs in informal ways through contact with other Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander teachers and students, rather than formally in classrooms through specific Cultural subjects.

The Indigenous student experience of actor-training in Australia I examine in Chapter 6, where I examine the pathways available for Indigenous students towards formal acting training. Interestingly, for many Indigenous students this journey begins with common experiences, and is, as I will demonstrate, a significantly different starting point from that of many non-Indigenous acting student pathways. I then investigate why Indigenous acting students chose to study at mainstream acting institutes, and what their experiences of these programs were. I will also highlight the critical differences that exist, in the experiences of Indigenous students, between the Aboriginal identified actor training programs and that of the mainstream actor training programs.

In conclusion, in Chapter 7, I summarise the key questions and arguments outlined at the beginning of this thesis, and I discuss what the findings presented in Chapter 5 and 6 have to contribute to this inquiry. I then, through the theoretical model I introduced in Chapter 2, interpret the type of cultural exchanges or “terrain” that Indigenous students navigate in their journey to be an actor in Australia. Lastly, I present some new directions that have taken place in the Indigenous performing arts sector and across the Australian socio-political landscape that have

emerged during the writing of this thesis, and I discuss what future outcomes might transpire from these changes.

CHAPTER 2

LOCATING CULTURE IN ACTOR TRAINING

Introduction

The overarching aim of this thesis, as outlined in the previous chapter, is to understand in what ways, and to what extent Indigenous students are able to engage with Culture during the time they spend training to become an actor. A key part of this exploration will be how students themselves (but also their teachers) give meaning to this engagement (or lack of engagement) through the ways in which they talk about their experiences in actor-training institutions. As an indication of what such talk might reveal about the dynamic relationships between Culture and identity, I concluded the previous chapter with some stories of my own experiences. However, while the reflections offered by students and teachers in interviews are very much at the heart of this thesis (and while this second chapter will conclude with some methodological remarks about the process of recording and analysing interviews), I certainly had some theoretical assumptions in mind as I approached these interviews.

This chapter, therefore, sets out some of the theory which informed my examination of how Indigenous students experience training in mainstream and/or Aboriginal-identified programs. The problematic is that in a colonised country like Australia the mainstream and Aboriginal-identified programs—while vastly different in terms of context and history—are not entirely separate from one another. The points where these programs intersect, I argue, are around narrowly conceived pedagogical questions (such as ‘what is current best practice when it comes to teaching introductory

voice and movement skills?’). The points of divergence, in my view, are around questions of culture/Culture, where it becomes necessary to ask whether such skills as introductory voice and movement even make sense in isolation from the cultural identities and histories of the performers. It is this negotiation between pedagogy and culture that helps define mainstream and Aboriginal-identified institutions as belonging to largely separate domains¹² of training, although, as I explain below, there will always remain at least the possibility for exchange within and across these domains. In what follows, I outline some key models of inter-cultural exchange developed by scholars in performance studies before suggesting my own refinements to these models in order to take more account of intra-cultural and cross-cultural exchange, as well as to try and bridge the gap between such abstract modeling and personal lived experience.

Models to interpret cultural exchanges

The most well known modeling of intercultural exchange in/through performance is arguably that offered by Patrice Pavis in “Toward a Theory of Culture and Mise en Scene” (1992, p. 4). The other model I will discuss in this section—a response to Pavis’ work—is the influential schema provided by Gilbert and Lo in “Toward a Topography of Cross Cultural Theatre Praxis” (2002).

Pavis’s “hourglass model” is proposed as a way to grasp the “dialectic of exchanges” that take place between cultures through theatre by analysing different texts and performance practices (p. 2). The hourglass is a filter system that maps the

¹² Like Stephen Harris (1990), I also use the notion of a domain, which is taken from sociolinguistics, that has connotations of content, physical space and the way in which things are done in a specific context (p. 14).

transfer of these practices between a “source” (foreign) and a “target” (Western) cultures, or “cultural foreign” and “cultural familiar” as Carlson similarly frames them in his article, “Peter Brook’s *The Mahabharata* and Ann Mnouchkine’s *L’Indiade*” (1990, p. 50). In outlining his model, Pavis proposes that there are twelve stages (sites of interaction) that foreign cultures will “filter” through when in contact with a target culture. Pavis examines the way cultures interact through theatre practices. Cultural remnants, according to Pavis, may attach themselves to these practices. He explains how his model works:

In the upper bowl is a foreign culture, the source culture, which is more or less codified and solidified in diverse anthropological, sociological or artistic modelizations. In order to reach us [Westerners] this culture must pass through a narrow neck. If the grains of culture or conglomerate are sufficiently fine they will flow through without any trouble, into the lower bowl that of the target culture. (1992, p. 4)

Many objections have been raised to Pavis’ model. Most notably by Bharucha (1993), who argued that the hourglass looks decidedly hierarchical with its top-to-bottom structure. Pavis tries to head off such criticism by arguing that the process works both upwards and downwards: “the hourglass is designed to be turned around, to question once again every sedimentation, to flow indefinitely from one culture to another” (1992, p. 5). Unfortunately, however, the process, as he imagines it, adheres strictly to

a set of clearly delimited cultural and artistic practices. It is a system that flows only one way even if the cultures involved are reversed. It is therefore inherently hierarchical, and problematic, in that it does not necessarily take into consideration the multiplicity of events or circumstances that can take place within and without the two cultures. It does not also regard the historicity of each culture and the impact that those histories might have on each specific exchange. Within settler societies, the historical experiences of target and source cultures often impact on those interactions.

Pavis's model places theatre practice at the centre of his cultural analysis. Gilbert and Lo suggest that Pavis's model should take into consideration the wider issues of power that exist between cultures (especially in post-colonial societies) which can have a decisive effect on the work of any particular group of theatre practitioners. The hourglass model, they argue, does not take into account the politics inherent in any exchange between source and target cultures, nor does it consider any sites of intervention or resistance (2002, p. 43). In short, for Gilbert and Lo, the Pavis model is premised on aesthetics rather than on politics.

To address these concerns, Gilbert and Lo propose an alternative model that includes two added processes; investigating the sociological contexts of cultures engaged in any exchange, and incorporating consideration of a hybrid system that can mediate between source and target cultures. To this end, they adopt a post-colonial perspective, one which "rests on a notion of differentiated hybridity that works in multiple and sometimes opposing ways" (2002, p. 45). Here, Gilbert and Lo draw upon the foundational work of Homi Bhabha, whose conception of hybridity favours the metaphor of a staircase:

The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybrid that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

(1994, p. 5)

Bhabha proposes that the function of the hybrid is the mediation of the differences that occur between two opposing cultures, each at either end of a spectrum. The space of hybridity is seen as having no allegiance to any particular culture. It is notionally free from the inherent hierarchies that exist, especially, he argues, in post-colonial contexts. And yet, the metaphor of the staircase is still strongly reminiscent of Pavis' hourglass model in its verticality, and therefore, implied hierarchy. On the other hand, he is clearly interested in a much more complex, multi-functional notion of hybridity than is Pavis.

Gilbert, Lo and other scholars have followed Bhabha in tracking the diversity of factors that make for such varied experiences of hybridity. Thus, Robert Young, in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), distinguishes between what he calls "Organic" and "Intentional" hybridity, while noting that both can co-exist within the same space of cultural encounter. He defines organic hybridity as that which operates without conscious contestations, and which can move between different cultures with mastery. Intentional hybridity, by contrast, will generally be direct and

confrontational in its approach (Young, 1995, p. 22). Taking up Young's categories, in her essay, "Beyond Happy Hybridity" (2000), Jacqueline Lo describes an organic hybridity as one that is relatively indifferent to underlying issues of political and economic power (2000, p. 153). This hybridity is attributed to forms that take from various styles to create a type of fusion identity. It has a stabilising function to settle cultural differences and contestations (Lo, 2000, p. 154). Gilbert and Lo (2002) however, see "differentiated hybridity" as a necessary corrective to the kind of value-free, politically neutral model of cultural exchange envisaged by Pavis. It (differentiated hybridity) functions to pinpoint areas of conflict; it is antagonistic and dialogical; it unmask the other in its duality. Hybridity is not simply a "natural" consequence of the coming together of two different cultures; instead, it has the potential to unsettle these seemingly "happy" relationships. So, while the organic aspects within a space of hybrid cultural exchange are about mediating differences (keeping things smooth and comfortable); the intentional aspects of the exchange are about confronting and negotiating conflict.

Although I embrace the idea of hybridity in all its forms, I often find myself in conflict about the use of the term due to its biological connotations. There was a time not that long ago when the prevailing narrative was that the Indigenous people of Australia would eventually perish, become extinct, due to the relations between settler and Aboriginal peoples. Consequently categorised by these exchanges, Aboriginal people were referred to as either: full-blood, half-caste, quadroon, octoroon, a person of admixture. These terms describe the generational exchanges with non-Aboriginal people. They are in a sense a biological interpretation of another's identity. I therefore

resist the use of the term hybrid for the purposes of this research. I do however draw on the ideas of hybridity, acknowledging that like the hybrid model, the Indigenous student actor does move between different cultures with mastery. However, the Indigenous student is not value-free, or politically neutral, as his or her presence within the institution can sometimes highlight areas of conflict and unsettle seemingly “happy hybrid” encounters. This will be evident in the second half of the thesis when I discuss graduate student experiences.

A post-colonial approach also examines the place of power in all exchanges between different settler and host societies. Gilbert and Lo argue that by examining the “historicized and politicized configurations” between cultures, hierarchies can be revealed (2002, p. 44). So too do I also recognise that in a colonised society such as Australia, a dominant cultural influence will be active between the different training contexts. I suggest that this influence can be highlighted by examining the sociopolitical histories of each training context as suggested by Gilbert and Lo.

The model I have adapted, from Gilbert and Lo’s methodologies, will also highlight the multiplicity of cultural exchanges occurring for, as well as the cultural influences impacting on, the Indigenous acting student when in contact with different actor-training contexts.

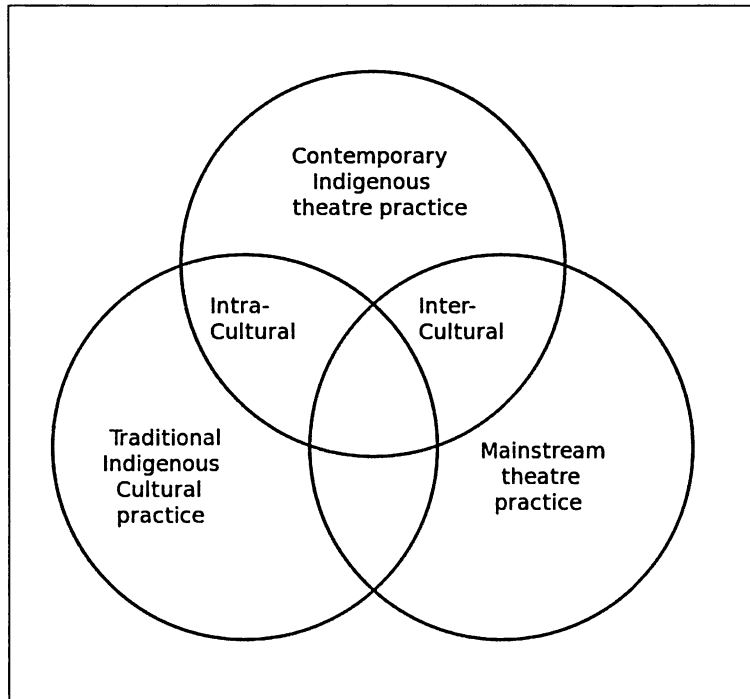
Critical ventures

I arrived at the model I am about to present shortly by I having previously attempted other interpretive prototypes. In 2008 I wrote an article, “The Bennelong Complex: Critical perspectives on contemporary Indigenous theatre and performance practice and

the cross-cultural experience in Australia". In this article I examined what I thought were the limitations of current theoretical approaches to the study of Indigenous theatre and performance practice. I argued that most of the literature on and about Indigenous theatre practice is dominated by Western ideological frameworks:

Essentially these frameworks serve to interpret Indigenous practice for a non-Indigenous audience. They do not emphasise or always acknowledge notions of Indigenous agency, identity and subjectivity (2008, p. 74).

In the article I proposed that instead of focusing on where contemporary Indigenous theatre practices intersect with Western theories of acting, that what needs further consideration is the intra-cultural activity that can occur between contemporary and traditional performance practices for Indigenous theatre practitioners. I also argued that there exists a multiplicity of experiences between and betwixt practices that Indigenous actors might navigate in their practice. I chose to illustrate these points with the following diagram:



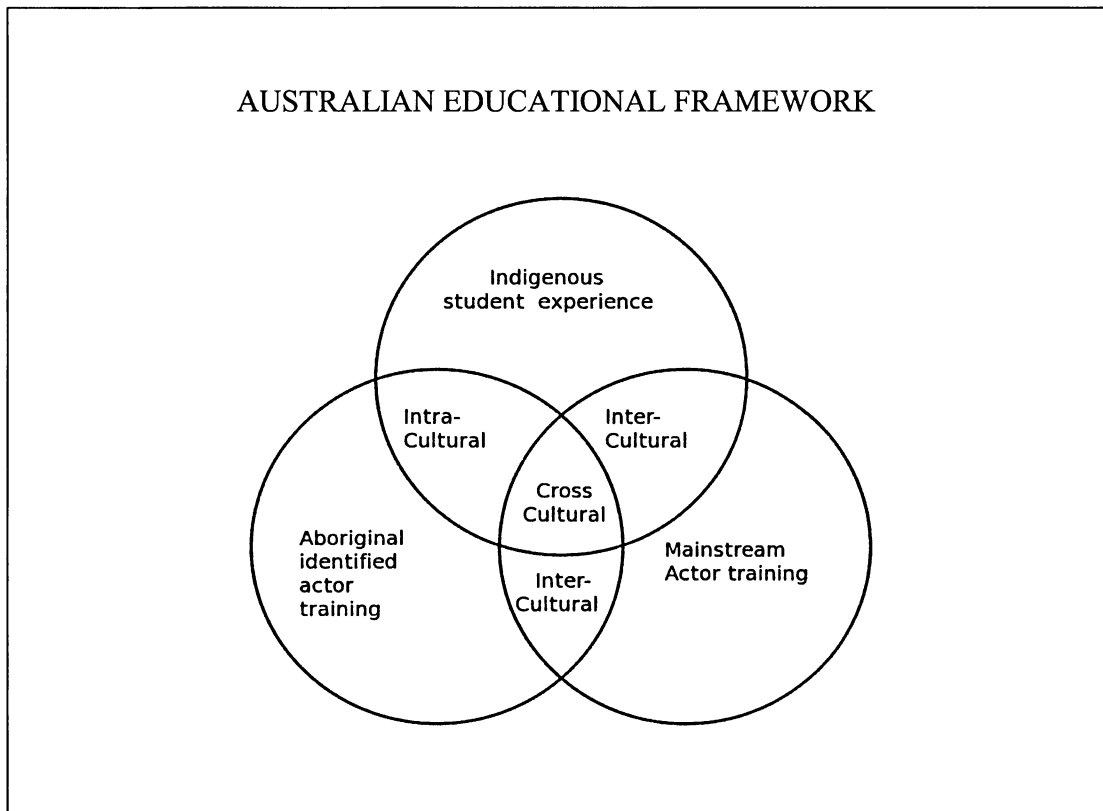
In this diagram I demonstrated that contemporary Indigenous performance practices intersect with both traditional and Western performance practices and that once this is acknowledged, other in between spaces emerge, and that these spaces can be interpreted by specific cultural interactions taking place. For example, between contemporary and traditional Aboriginal performance practices there is **intra-cultural** activity. Between Western theatre practices and traditional Aboriginal performance practices there is **inter-cultural** activity. At other times there may also exist **cross-cultural** experiences; and these exchanges are known as those spaces where all practices overlap and interconnect. I will explain in more detail what these terms mean below:

Models are a useful starting point from which to interpret cultural exchanges, as Pavis, Gilbert and Lo demonstrate. They also offer ways of acknowledging the

multiple sites of contact between, within, and around a practice. However, the models of Pavis, and Gilbert and Lo discussed, and even my own (above) do not allow for an interpretation of how Indigenous theatre and performance practitioners make meaning from these experiences. To do this, I argue, would require placing the practitioner, or in this case, the student at the centre of that investigation. Therefore, the model I will use to interpret the Indigenous experience of different actor-training sites is adapted from those of Pavis, Gilbert and Lo, and from my own prototype.

Spheres of cultural influence

The 'Spheres of Cultural Influence' model below is what I will use to examine the experiences of Indigenous students of the different training contexts that they engage with during their careers in Australia.



This model shows that a number of cultural experiences are on offer for the Indigenous student to navigate during their training to be an actor. These experiences can, I suggest, be understood conceptually as intra-cultural, cross-cultural, and inter-cultural. It also highlights the broader cultural (educational) framework overarching these domains.

Pedagogical and cultural domains

In Australia most actor-training programs function within a broader educational (and therefore cultural) framework. In “Radical Pedagogy as Cultural Politics”, Henry A. Giroux argues that schools are not simply institutional sites, but may be considered “cultural arenas” where heterogeneous ideological mechanisms are at work (1991, p. 152). Educational standards, for Giroux, are never innocent of social, economic and institutional contexts (1991, p. 155). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu in *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2000) claims that every institution owes its specific structure and function to the self-reproduction of its own culture (2000, p. 54). Bourdieu’s claims about social institutions are part of a much larger structuralist discourse on the divisions of social classes where he argues that the purpose of education is the reproduction of these implicit hierarchies. For both Giroux and Bourdieu, however training institutes in modern society transmit specific knowledges, histories, skills and codes of social behaviour. Therefore, inherent in the pedagogy and culture of actor-training programs and institutes is a larger cultural agenda. I suggest however that there is a multiplicity of different cultural agendas constantly influencing training contexts.

Pedagogy is both the instruction of knowledge and skills, and the philosophy of instruction. The broader educational framework in Australia controls what knowledge and skills are taught. The way teachers teach, their practice, their personal methodology, or style of instruction, is often based on their personal principles about teaching. A teacher’s approach can be determined by how one was taught, it can also be something developed from one’s own background or heritage. When you bring a

student into the classroom, where they bring with them their own set of cultural experiences, there is the potential for clashes with, opposition to, or celebrated of cultural differences.

An engagement with these intersections (culture and pedagogy) does not necessarily occur exclusively from one another, but will often occur in combination. “Culture and pedagogy are”, as David Trend remarks in *Cultural Pedagogy: art, education and politics*, “but two sides of the same coin” (1992, p. 17). Despite their many affinities, however, pedagogy and culture are usually considered separate issues, with the former functioning as the delivery mechanism for the latter (Trend, 1992, p 9). For Bhabha pedagogy must constantly be articulated to be “unfolding”, or as he clarifies, “embodied, affectively experienced” (1994, p. 145). This is a constructivist approach to pedagogy where the experiences of students are used to enhance knowledge retention. In this way pedagogy can be seen as taking place in different cultural contexts. These cultural contexts are also not value neutral.

To understand more about the types of cultural exchanges that can take place in pedagogical contexts, and in the case of this thesis, actor training contexts, and taking into account the larger educational frameworks, I use my ‘Spheres of Cultural Influence’ model. I now frame the terms I use to describe the type of cultural encounters that can take place for Indigenous students when in contact with different pedagogical contexts. These terms are widely used in a variety of academic paradigms, however I feel that they are often used quite loosely. So, I will revisit here the terms; intra-cultural, cross-cultural and inter-cultural.

Intra-cultural, cross-cultural and inter-cultural

Our understanding and knowledge of these concepts within an academic framework occurs in very different and often contested ways. They exist to assist with understanding the relations between cultures. Ethnographer James Clifford describes these terms as a negotiated present process (1988, p. 273). The relations between cultures are a complex interaction of entities, which are in a constant process of negotiating identity (Watson, 2002, p. 3). It is the meeting of cultures that create “in between” spaces that define these relationships. These spaces are discursive: sites of negotiation, conflict, and debate (Bhabha, 1994, p. 22). There are, according to Watson, at least four major types of negotiation that occur between cultures, which he identifies as transcultural, cross-cultural, multicultural and inter-cultural (Watson, 2002, p. 3). I however will only engage with three spaces of negotiation: the inter-cultural, cross-cultural and intra-cultural, and in examining these concepts define the way I used them in the context of this thesis.

The intra-cultural, according to Pavis, concerns “the traditions of a single nation, which is very often almost forgotten or deformed and has to be reconstructed” (1992, p. 20). Interestingly, in making this distinction, Pavis never suggests how a culture comes to be forgotten or deformed. However, I view intra-cultural in a very different way. I perceive and frame it as that which occurs between the many traditions of a single nation. However, it is also the exchange of both new ideas and old ways. The intra-cultural is somewhat temporal in that our understanding of what occurs in an exchange can shift over time. In a teleological sense the intra-cultural is both extrinsic, meaning that it occurs through practice, and intrinsic, in that what is experienced is not

always something external, but personal and inter-subjective. Therefore what is experienced is not deformed or forgotten, it is instead reconstructed and reincorporated with every new encounter.

Rustom Bharucha, who writes extensively on culture and theatre, defines intra-cultural as “cultural relations between and across specific communities and regions within the boundaries of the nation state” (2000, p. 8). The intra-cultural can therefore also be characterised by the space (discursive) or the place (location) where these encounters take place. In this thesis I frame intra-cultural as that which occurs between Indigenous students and a source (familiar) cultural framework. This encounter, I suggest, occurs on site (institute or campus), and between people (students, teachers, and directors).

The inter-cultural, according to Watson, is a meeting between two or more cultures, but occurs and what is generated between cultures is limited to a single event. It is “predicated on a celebration of difference, a cultural plurality that implies contact, give and take, but no change in culture involved” (2002, p. 11). For Watson, inter-cultural implies that when cultures come together in the act of performance, it is the celebration of that event. The event itself has no particular efficacy other than perhaps the meeting of differences. Differences in this space are mediated. Watson claims that theatre is that common ground in which difference is displayed and, most importantly, negotiated (2002, p. 12). Therefore, inter-cultural performance practice is the condition under which the spectacle of difference emerges. Further, inter-cultural practice concerns itself more with the mediation of differences, rather than the exploration of cultures. However, as mentioned earlier, wherever and whenever negotiations between

cultures occur there exists the potentiality for disruption, conflict, and or inherent issues of dominance to emerge. When I refer to the term inter-cultural, especially in the context of a colonized country, it will imply a site of mutual contestation.

The cross-cultural, on the other hand, is a situation in which many cultural influences or fragments co-exist explicitly in one cohesive object, space, event or ritual. For Watson, these spaces are “[w]here cultural traces exist and are able to retain their integrity rather than becoming diluted, and are appropriated as a way of explicating the cultural discourse at the centre of the transaction” (2002, p. 4). Therefore, the cross-cultural implies a discursive space where multiple experiences converge. In this space, the possibility for the exchange of cultural practices can occur. However, this interaction is not determined by any specificity of location; but can be often framed as neutral, happening anywhere at anytime. It is a constructed space determined by shared experiences. Examples are conferences, festivals and workshops. When I look at the cross-cultural and the way it is revealed through my model, it exists in a space where all locations, practices and people meet. It is at the heart of the model.

The terms intra-cultural, inter-cultural and cross-cultural assist me with a starting point for examining the spaces that emerge when Indigenous students intersect with mainstream and Aboriginal-identified actor-training domains. They also show that the relationship between Aboriginal and mainstream actor-training programs can also be best interpreted through an engagement with these concepts. In the second half of the thesis I will use this model plus the theoretical approaches discussed to examine the Indigenous student experience of these actor-training domains. I will now present and

discuss the methodology employed to investigate these experiences.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research project informed by in-depth interviews conducted with Indigenous graduates from a selection of different actor-training programs, some of which are very strongly, and historically, “Aboriginal-identified” programs, and some of which are offered by “mainstream” institutions. This qualitative research is interpretive in that there is an engagement with the worldview of each participant, and which also seeks to explore the individual perceptions of a specific experience. The participants of this research project are themselves unique to the experiences examined.

In the book, “Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry” (1994), the author, Schwandt, states that “proponents [researchers] share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it” (1994, p. 18). In acknowledging that the actor training “world” is mostly made up from students, but also the trainers and staff who manage and run these programs and institutes, I propose to include all these perspectives in this research.

Qualitative research is also about understanding in context rather than exploring rules or laws (Willis, 2007, p. 121). This research did not go in search of statistically valid responses, which often offer a single interpretation to a judgment, as this approach does not always take into account multiple perspectives that may pertain to a given situation.

Participants

I interviewed graduates. I did not interview students. The rationale for choosing graduates rather than students is that it is essential to this research that participants have had time to reflect on their experiences at drama school, and also that they could relate those training experiences to a working knowledge of what it is to be an Indigenous actor in the entertainment industry. Being a graduate myself, I know that it can take some years before you actually consider all the facets of the training undertaken to become an actor. It is not until after you graduate that you can apply skills learnt in a professional context, or have the opportunity to discuss different approaches to acting with other acting colleagues. Hindsight is important to this research, as it allows participants to reflect on their own experiences of the programs themselves, and the “real world” that happens after graduating from an institutional context. While in training, students do not have distance to be able to reflect, because they are “in” those experiences.

In many cases, the Indigenous graduates I interviewed had experienced training in both Aboriginal-identified and mainstream settings, and were able to offer very insightful cross-institutional perspectives. Acknowledging, however, that the student experience in any pedagogical encounter is never independent of the teacher experience, I also conducted several in-depth interviews with teachers, directors and other staff from the actor-training programs I investigated.

I intentionally name the interviewees rather than assign them codes. I do this primarily because naming participants redresses the dehumanising effects of scientific systems that have historically hidden social and political agendas, especially in

Aboriginal affairs in this country. Each participant has consented to the use and recording of his or her name in this research project. I therefore also use their full names throughout this thesis.

In all, I interviewed as part of this research, ten Indigenous acting graduates, four acting trainers (some of whom were also course coordinators), one former teacher, four college directors, plus three former managers. The interviews took place over a year beginning in April 2008 when I interviewed two retired performing arts academics, Dr Gordon Beattie and Dr Anne Marshall.

Beattie and Marshall were involved in setting up the Theatre Studies department at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) from 1983 to 2000. That course included a specific Australian Aboriginal performance subject at the College of Arts, School for Education, developed by Marshall and Pauline Lampton in 1992. The program was later run by Mary Mooney at the Faculty of Education. The course's intention was to examine the aesthetics, forms and styles present in Aboriginal performance as vital to understanding contemporary Aboriginality. The course was a first in that it offered a study of Aboriginal performance. Unique for its time, the program sat in the theatre performance program (rather than as an anthropological subject). The Aboriginal performance modules were later made available to students as electives across departments within the Faculty.

Marshall and Beattie also guest edited a special edition on Aboriginal performance for the *Australasian Drama Studies Journal* in 2000. For these reasons I felt it was important to discuss my research approach with them before embarking on this project. Their advices to me was that I should think less about defining Aboriginal

performance practice and focus more on investigating the world-view of Indigenous students, and to then present these experiences as central to the research. Marshall suggested to me that I might come to recognise the differences that may or may not exist between Aboriginal-identified and mainstream actor-training programs by taking this approach. In this matter Marshall was mostly right.

My place

In approaching research participants I often drew upon my commonalities with Indigenous acting graduates, and with the acting teachers of both mainstream and Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs. I am recognised by other Aboriginal acting graduates as having gone through a similar actor-training experience. I am also identified as having Aboriginal heritage, which connects me historically to a common Indigenous experience. Other acting teachers and trainers also know me through my position as theatre teacher at the Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts. This situation has enabled me to draw on these associations to obtain a privileged audience with both graduates, and with people in the profession who are often the hardest to pin down. For Kate Rossmanith, the way social agents describe a cultural sphere to someone outside that sphere will differ from the discourses that operate within the cultural sphere (2004, p. 222). I suggest that I had a particularly invaluable advantage having had similar experiences and a commonality with all those interviewed, especially the Indigenous graduates; that is, I was able to engage my research participants in a commonly held discourse from within the cultural sphere, and their descriptions to me of their experiences were to someone they

recognised as being within that sphere. Because of this, most of the people I interviewed seemed comfortable, and they often spoke in a less formal manner, using forms of expression and idioms common to a shared experience. To bypass the institutionalised rhetoric that can emerge when interviewing graduates, teachers, staff and managers, I often appealed to this insider-ness. This thesis is, however, about delving deeper than the surface articulation of these shared ideas and experiences.

Ethics

For any research that engages with people, clearance is required from a university research ethics committee. The governance of ethical research practices protects communities who are often vulnerable to exploitation. Indigenous Australians are considered to be one of these communities at risk. Therefore, interviewing Indigenous people for research purposes often requires permission from the local Aboriginal community, or from relevant local Aboriginal community organisations. Since this research investigates individual accounts of Indigenous students, and not those of a particular community, I did not require consent from any Aboriginal community or representative organisation, although I did receive letters of support from relevant industry groups, as well as from Indigenous leaders in the field. These letters of support verify both my stake in the research, and the importance of the research to the field of enquiry. These documents are included in Appendix A of this thesis.¹³ Also included in the Appendix is a copy of the University of Sydney Research Ethics

¹³ I received endorsement from the following people: Frederick Copperwaite, Co-Chair of Moogahlin Aboriginal Performing Arts Incorporated; Michelle Blanchard, Deputy Director of the Koori Centre, University of Sydney; and Dr Anne Marshall, former course coordinator of Aboriginal performance at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean.

Committee approved consent form (which all participants signed), and a copy of the information sheet provided to participants.

Data Collection

The interpretivist tradition of research, according to Willis is not always a single understanding of the “right” way of viewing a particular situation. Instead, it is an understanding of multiple perspectives on the topic (2007. p. 113). I, like Willis, also search for multiple perspectives on a topic.

In approaching these interviews I set a similar set of questions for both graduates and teachers, which address three overarching questions outlined at the beginning of this thesis:

1. When, where, and how do Indigenous students engage meaningfully with Culture during their training to be an actor?
2. Are there cultural differences between the experiences of students at mainstream and Aboriginal-identified actor training programs?
3. How do institutes support their Indigenous students who see Culture as a key resource in their approach to making theatre?

The line of questioning I took was to investigate these questions further. For example, I asked acting graduates to discuss how and when they decided to attend formal training. Many, as mentioned, choose to start their careers at an Aboriginal-identified actor training program. So, what was revealing was that when asked follow up questions

like; was there any aspect of Indigenous performance culture provided with your training, many chose to describe the experience of a mainstream program and not the Aboriginal program where they began their careers. More importantly was the way in which participants began to compare experiences not based solely on skills development but on Cultural engagement. This line of questioning also provided similar results for the teachers, trainers and managers of these programs who themselves may also have common experiences of training contexts, but who may have varying experiences of Indigenous students and Culture.

The interviews collected were transcribed and placed in tables, one for graduates and one for teachers and trainers, in a way that these responses to specific questions could easily be compared across both levels of an institutional actor-training experience. The tabled interview transcripts can be found in Appendix B.

Having established both a theoretical model for examining the Indigenous student experience of the different actor-training contexts available in Australia, as well as describing the way in which the interviews undertaken were collated, I begin now by investigating the actor-training contexts themselves, focusing on identifying the cultural framework underpinning each training program. I will discuss the similarities and differences that exist between the Aboriginal-identified and mainstream actor-training programs, which I argue are not necessarily pedagogical, but mostly cultural. In the chapters that follow I then present the Indigenous student experience of these pedagogical and cultural domains.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that there could be a multiplicity of cultural exchanges that Indigenous students experience during their training to be an actor in Australia. I also proposed that specific cultural/Cultural frameworks underpin and or have influence, on not only the training taking place in each institution but also on the delivery of these programs by teachers and trainers. These influences are sometimes explicit, whilst at other times implicit. In investigating these cultural/Cultural influences, I again turn to Gilbert and Lo who suggest that the cultural centre of any exchange may be revealed by a consideration of the “historicized and politicized configuration” of each (exchange) (2002, p. 31). I will, in this chapter and the following, adapt Gilbert and Lo’s approach, which looks at performance as cultural exchange, and investigates actor-training in Australia through the historical and socio-political discourse on and around it. I will, in following this methodology, focus on those writings that include a socio-political history of actor training in Australia. I begin with mainstream programs, and using a similar approach, I then present the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs.

Earlier in this thesis I also quoted from Bourdieu, who claimed that training institutes in modern society transmit specific knowledges, histories, skills and codes of social behavior. Institutions owe their specific structure and function to the self-reproduction of their own culture (2000, p. 54). It is not too far to claim that, in some

architectural way, institutions may reflect in structure the culture reproduced inside of them. As Lowell Lewis remarks:

Embodied humans take on the characteristics of the places they inhabit and those places in turn take on the characteristics of the places they inhabit, and those places in turn, are modified to suit the dwelling practices of the humans (2006, p. 276).

The propositions put forward by Bourdieu and Lewis, above, invoke for me the question; can institutional settings reveal something about the cultural influences on the type of training that takes place inside them? And, in what way do teachers and trainers embody the characteristics of the places they inhabit, or in the service of these institutes? My approach to answering these questions will be to describe the structures and the presentation of the buildings that house these programs, whilst also looking to those writings that investigate the methodologies and approaches that the teachers and trainers employ in the delivery of actor-training. In this chapter I also include a brief introduction to the three mainstream actor training institutes, concentrating on the history of each, the architecture, and the course structure of each program.

Writing on and about mainstream actor-training in Australia

Out of all that is written specifically on and about mainstream actor-training in Australia, there are two published documents of importance to this thesis: John Harrop and Michael Addison's article, "Actor-training in Australia" (1971), and Barry

O'Connor's book, *Mapping Training Mapping Performance* (2006), who present a historical account of the mainstream programs, as well as examining the approaches to acting that these programs embrace and the trainers employ. The *Australasian Drama Studies Journal* has in recent years also released two focus issues on actor training. *Lineages, Techniques, Training and Traditions* (2008), and *Teaching Theatre Performance and Drama Studies* (2010). In addition to these publications, there are also three unpublished theses that I discuss here: Rachel Lander's "Actors as Important as Sputniks? The Relationship between Training and Subsidy in the Australian Performing Arts since World War II" (2001), Ross Prior's "Characterising Actor Trainers Understanding of their Practice in Australian and English Drama Schools" (2004), and Denise Young's Masters thesis "Twentieth century theories on actor-training and current Australian practice" (Finders University, 1997). These writings provide a social-political background to the emergence of institutionalised actor-training in Australia, plus a recent investigation into the acting methodologies that trainers, from mainstream programs, draw upon in their teaching practice.

Institutional actor training, as we know it today, is heavily influenced by particular theatre practices that came from not only the English speaking world, but also Western-European approaches to actor training. Institutional actor training is relatively new to Australia. Historically, English language actor-training tended towards the apprentice model until the advent of the conservatory style institutional model that we see dominating most of the Western world today. This shift began as early as the 1900s when companies like Her Majesty's Theatre in London established their own training Academy in the dramatic arts. This formalising of the apprenticeship

model came to subvert its parentage twenty years later when this Academy¹⁴ became an independent training organisation that included its own theatre. In Australia also, actor training, much like the early English training models, primarily took place in theatres and theatre companies like the Independent Theatre and Ensemble Theatre¹⁵ in Sydney, and later the Australian Performance Group¹⁶ in Melbourne. Individual teachers and trainers also offered private classes. In 1958 with the establishment of the first national actor-training program at NIDA in Sydney, there was a shift away from primarily companies and individuals to the institution model of actor-training.

Landers (2001) argues, that the emergence of institutionalised actor-training in Australia came about due to the changing perceptions of actor-training from the 1950s onwards. For Landers, the rise of institutionalised actor-training in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century repositioned the practice of acting from art to work, and from here it was an easy step to positioning acting as a “profession”. Landers attributes this shift to the influence of Stanislavski, and the English and American interpretations of his work,.

The emergence of institutionalised training in the arts cannot be solely attributed to Stanislavski, or to any one specific practice. Instead, I argue that a critical factor in the establishment of actor-training programs in Australia was the funding role played by Australian governments. Known as the “golden years” of the post World

¹⁴ The Academy was granted Royal Charter in 1920. It is now known as the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

¹⁵ The Ensemble Theatre was set up in 1958 under tutor Hayes Gordon, an American expatriate. Actors studied various popular American-derived methodologies and approaches to acting by Lee Strasberg, Stanislavski, and Meisner. In 1960, the company moved to the current premises in an old boatshed at Careening Cove in Kirribilli.

¹⁶ Even though the Australian Performance Group did not undertake any type of formal actor training, it did provide opportunities for a group of actors to explore different approaches to Australian theatre practice by Australian artists.

War II period, during the mid 1950s, various state and federal governments began to allocate increasingly large amounts of public monies towards the creation of new institutions, and cultural agencies. This was an expansive time in Australia's history and organizations like the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, (formed in 1954) were pivotal in advocating for more government funding for the arts, and for the development of state and national arts agendas and policies. But when it came to establishing the first publicly funded national actor-training institute, a carefully developed standardised program that would satisfy the funding regulations of government departments was needed. This framework would also require the endorsement of the entertainment industry at large if graduates from this program were to be accepted by the industry as emerging professional actors. According to Landers, in 1956, the then director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, Hugh Hunt, had no doubt that a national drama school for Australian actors should be based on the Stanislavsky model, methodologies, and practices of theatre training being embraced by theatre practitioners across Europe, and specifically Russia (Landers, 2001, p. 199). What became apparent, however, was that there were two very strong agendas driving the development of the acting program at NIDA, the academy and the profession, which developed into a very vibrant tension that actor training programs even today still struggle with.

NIDA was eventually founded in 1958 and had at its helm Robert Quentin who was concurrently appointed senior lecturer in the School of English at the University of NSW (UNSW) and Head of NIDA. However, his position was brief due to rising tensions between the academy and the industry who felt that the academy model for

actors did not comfortably align with the conservatory style practice based model that NIDA had developed. According to Young (1997), NIDA did not initially adopt a fully systematised approach to actor-training when it opened its doors to student actors, but has increasingly done so. According to performance scholar Phillip Parsons (1995), Robert Quentin resigned from NIDA in 1964 and created a separate university department, establishing the School of Drama at UNSW in 1966 (p. 393).

What can be taken from this brief historical account is that the emergence of the actor-training institute in Australia did not follow an easy development, especially in the progression of a pedagogical practice. Also, that there was a time in Australia's history when the place of culture in Australian society was increasingly seen as the responsibility of governments. This changing political paradigm provided the right conditions for the establishment of a national drama school. The model of actor-training adopted by the subsequent Heads of NIDA became more aligned with Hunt's original conception, of the conservatory practice based methodologies advocated by Stanislavski, and the English and American interpretations of his work.

Addison and Harrop in "Actor-training in Australia" (1971), made the prediction, that Australia would not expand past the institutional actor-training model adopted by NIDA. They also argued that the actor training methodologies that might develop from other sites, like the theatre companies and individuals, would most likely be restrained by the modes of practice that already dominated Australian drama programs, and to some extent university drama programs (p. 186). Addison and Harrop were somewhat right in their prediction. The model adopted by NIDA has come to influence heavily, in varying degrees, other training institutes that followed

like VCA and WAAPA, as well as informing the private sector programs. I talk more about this in chapter 5. Something that Addison and Harrop did not predict however is the rise of what many Indigenous Australians call “black theatre schools”; or what I call Aboriginal actor-training programs, which I will discuss in greater detail in the chapters that follow. Nor did they when considering future actor training practice, consider the influence of the personal practices and methodologies that acting teachers bring to the classroom context.

Institutes do not in themselves drive a particular cultural agendas, teachers and more particularly, managers and leaders do. O’Connor argues that many acting teachers and trainers favour specific actor-training methods. As he notes: Lindy Davies (former Head of School at VCA) who prefers to teach “Impulse Work”, Tony Knight (former Head of Acting at NIDA) who prefers the “Yat”¹⁷ system, and Leonard Meenach (from QUT) who is informed by the Eric Morris system¹⁸ (2006, p. 47). Prior argues that the teachers and trainers, (like those mentioned above), are often graduates of local acting programs themselves, or are graduates of international acting schools, and approach the teaching of acting mostly in the same way as they were taught. Alternatively, they may have spent some time developing their own practice of actor training, or had acting experience, which they may also bring to their teaching practice. However, this pedagogy is largely unarticulated.

Prior interviewed thirteen teaching “informants” (as he calls them) from five drama schools to better understand their teaching or training practices (2004, p. 131). What he found was that although many of the trainers interviewed did not articulate an

¹⁷ Yat is a system of movement analysis developed by Rudolf Laban.

¹⁸ The Eric Morris method of actor training is derived from Lee Strasberg’s Method Acting.

allegiance to any one actor-training methodology, overwhelmingly most believed that the best approach to teaching acting was anti-pedagogical, in that acting cannot be taught. Instead, many trainers saw acting as intrinsically embodied, experiential and subjective. Nevertheless, most trainers remarked that acting skills such as voice, movement and singing are important to the “craft” of acting (Prior. 2004, p. 245).

For Prior, the pedagogical processes employed by many of the actor-training programs and institutes are for the most part unarticulated by the teachers and trainers of these programs, only becoming known when investigated by researchers. The actor-training programs that are delivered in publically funded training institutes are, it seems, heavily influenced by a number of competing factors. Firstly there are the funding obligations from governments, then the expectations of the entertainment industry of graduates, plus the teachers and managers who bring their unique teaching methodologies to the classroom environment. What becomes clear is that not one apparent acting methodology is seen as underpinning the approaches to actor training adopted by any mainstream acting program. What can be said is that although not articulated, many institutes are influenced by the work of Stanislavski, whose own work played a major part in the delivery of the European–American models of conservatory style actor training.

I now want to discuss these publically funded mainstream actor-training institutes in more detail beginning with a brief history of each, and by a description of the architectural structure and function of each institute, and by this I mean the buildings. Earlier in this chapter I presented propositions by Bourdieu and Lewis that training institutes in modern society have cultural influence, and they carry certain

cultural expectations that students wittingly, or unwittingly take on. In whatever form they take, institutional settings reveal much about the culture of training that takes place inside of them. The architecture of the institutes not only reflects the form of the acting practice delivered inside the walls of that institute, but they also contribute to the cultural currency and status of the programs, and of graduates. Lindy Davies has also stated (when describing the 2002 architecture of the VCA drama school building), “Our building reflects the aesthetics of our practice ... our form is our content” (2006). I now introduce the mainstream actor training institutes by a description of the architecture and presentations of the buildings as I will discuss the programs in more detail at the end of chapter 5.

Mainstream actor-training programs

National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA)

NIDA rose from humble beginnings, established in 1958, it began operating out of an old jockeys’ change room at Kensington Racecourse. In 1988 the first renovations of the new NIDA buildings were completed. Architect Peter Prior was commissioned to design new accommodation for NIDA students, staff, and management. Armstrong had this to say about that process:

NIDA’s initial brief, and the dialogue through which the brief for the project was finally developed, was a mirror to the wider process whereby institutions at given points in their existence crystallise

programs for building projects. Briefs represent the function of the institution ... (1992, p. 103)

Another theatre designer, Kim Spinks, remarked that “Interestingly his [the architect’s] inspiration was not pedagogical but the grandest European theatre statement of the 19th-century Paris Opera” (Armstrong, 1992, p ix). Her position is that the architecture of the NIDA buildings spoke volumes about its educational aspirations and responsibilities as well as how little NIDA saw itself as part of an academic environment. For Spinks, NIDA’s new buildings did not visibly articulate its function as a teaching and learning institution but that the form contains many references to a grand European heritage and function.

NIDA’s second renovation, opened in 2001, was designed by Hassell Architecture and Peter Armstrong (again), and in close collaboration with NIDA staff. The building is linked to the original NIDA building opened in 1988, which incorporates the Parade Playhouse and Parade Space. This building contains; eight rehearsal rooms, costume and props workshops, lighting and sound studios, plus new teaching and administration space. The additional buildings are described by NIDA as being, “versatile entertainment and event venues”.¹⁹

The jewel in the crown of NIDA is the Parade Theatre. This space has a removable thrust stage with the potential to house an audience of up to 700. The NIDA staff are primarily housed in small individual offices, which line a rectangular courtyard at the rear of the old NIDA building. Visitors enter through an 11-metre high

¹⁹ Quote from NIDA website. URL: <http://www.nida.edu.au/The-NIDA-Building/default.aspx>

glass door that opens onto a giant foyer and bar area. The outside of the Parade Theatre is often spectacularly lit at night, creating a giant illuminating beacon that stretches along Anzac Parade in Kensington.

NIDA is an independent Registered Training Organisation (RTO), although there is a common misconception that it is part of the University of New South Wales (UNSW). While it is located on the UNSW campus grounds it leases land from the university. However, even though NIDA is not a division of the University administration, students do have access to the UNSW library, university union, counseling service, childcare, accommodation services and student services. NIDA is a primarily federally funded institution, and is one of nine members of the Commonwealth Roundtable for Excellence in Arts Training, offering a full-time three-year Bachelor of Dramatic Art in Acting. It also receives funding from state revenue and philanthropic donations. While all of the training institutes receive both federal and state monies, NIDA is framed as a national institution and therefore receives more Federal support than the other state-based institutes. The NIDA building is also owned by the Federal Government.

While best known for its Acting course, NIDA also offers undergraduate programs in; Design, Stage Management, Event Management, Lighting, Sound, Costume Making, Properties and Special Effects, plus Directing and Playwriting. NIDA full-time courses are accredited higher education programs approved under the (NSW) Higher Education Act, 2001. NIDA also offers an extensive open program that delivers after hours and weekend short courses, including a number of year-long part-time theatre programs. There is also a corporate division that provides performance

training to executives and private companies. In addition NIDA offers post-graduate Masters programs in playwriting, directing, voice and movement.

The course objectives outlined in the curriculum document, which was provided to me by the administration, states the following in the first instance:

The objective of the BDA (Bachelor of Dramatic Art) courses is to provide students with a systematic and coherent body of knowledge in the theory and practice of play production, theatrical and cultural history and dramatic literature.

The acting course contains general education subjects, theatre and cultural history, which are delivered in two subject areas: History of Theatre 1 and 2. These are taught in first and second year respectively. As mentioned, I will discuss the acting course in more detail in Chapter 5.

Victorian College of the Arts (VCA)

In the late 1980s, when I attended the School of Drama at VCA, it was a single-storey building. At the entrance were two small glass doors. In the front foyer of the building was the administrative hub, with the Drama School Director's office adjacent. Behind the front office was the communal staff room. Studio rehearsal and training spaces lined a single corridor, along which eager and exuberant students navigated between classes. From what I can remember, there were three large studios, and three small ones. The one aspect of the building that sticks in my mind is the bright sky blue

colour of the corridors. I do not know if this was a significant part of the aesthetic of the building, or if it reflected the form of my experience. But it evokes the memory of the challenges the course offered. The old drama school did not have its own theatre. The Grant Street Theatre, which is now heritage listed, served as resident theatre. It provided seating for 120 people, a bio box and fully functional lighting rig.

VCA is an arts campus that now takes up an entire block of Southbank from St Kilda Rd to Dodds Street in Melbourne city. The Drama School is separate from the main campus and is located on Dodds Street. VCA brings together an extensive range of creative disciplines including; Art, Dance, Theatre, Film and Television, Contemporary Music, Music Theatre, Production, Community Cultural Development and Indigenous Arts Management. VCA is now known as the Faculty of the VCA and Music. A new School of Drama, designed by Melbourne architects Edmund and Corrigan (Corrigan is also a theatre designer), was completed in 2002. A major feature of Melbourne's arts precinct at Southbank, VCA is described on the "Walking Melbourne" website as a:

Colourful building which expresses the genre in the facade. A dramatic composition of painted corrugated iron and abstract geometrical windows creates a whimsical effect for the VCA School of Drama and enhances the surrounding streetscape. The building was constructed on a budget of \$10.5 million, with nearly half of this funded by grants (Fishlock, 2001–2009).

The school now boasts three levels with new studios, and new performance spaces. The administration and staff quarters remain the same, but the entrance is far grander than when I went there. Large glass panels now herald the entry. The main theatre space is called *Space 28*. This is a large flexible performing space capable of seating 350 people. It has a suspended catwalk high above the main stage area that supports the lighting and audio requirements. It is a state-of-the-art performance space.

According to the college website the VCA now offers a Bachelor of Fine Art in either Production, or Theatre Practice, as well as post graduate programs in Voice, Performance Creation, Production, Theatre, and writing for Performance. VCA also offers a Doctor of Philosophy. At the time of this research, VCA offered a Bachelor of Dramatic Art, a three-year program, which provided intensive skills training, performance making projects, studio productions, and a wide variety of performance situations. The Bachelor course objectives were outlined in an online document that can no longer be found. A statement did mark the end of the course objectives, which went like this: “VCA Drama is committed to the development of the individual artist and, as such does not subscribe to a single method of work” (p. 3). In chapter 5, I examine the Bachelor in Dramatic Arts program in more detail. However, as mentioned above, this program has recently changed. As the interviews of teachers and trainer I undertook occurred at the time that the Bachelor program was running, I have kept this as the program I investigate as part of this thesis.

Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA)

WAAPA is primarily a state based institution. It offers Diploma and Degree level

courses in; Acting, Music Theatre, Production, and Arts Management. The Aboriginal Theatre course sits within WAAPA's program, even though it is a certificate level program. The main WAAPA building, located at the heart of the Edith Cowan University campus, boasts three theatre spaces: the Geoff Gibbs Theatre,²⁰ the Enright Studio,²¹ and the Round House theatre. The Geoff Gibbs Theatre is the largest theatre of the three. It has a proscenium arch with a maximum seating capacity of 297. The Enright Studio is a flexible box space with a floor area of 10.7m by 12.9m. The Roundhouse Theatre is a thrust stage that has the capacity to seat up to 194. Both the Roundhouse and the Gibbs Theatres have plush red seats that can be moved in any configuration. WAAPA also provides numerous rehearsal and workshop spaces.

In 2008 WAAPA underwent a facelift with a new logo embellished on its foyer doors, in printed material, and on the website home page. The Director of WAAPA, Julie Warne, states that the logo reflects the college's "passion for excellence and pursuit of perfection".²² The new look brand, according to WAAPA's newsletter, is circular in shape evoking images of a spotlight or a stage bound by seating, its repetitious elements invoking feelings of fluidity, movement and excitement: "Its colours of blue, red, pink, and orange reinforce a dynamic, energetic movement".²³ There are also plans to redevelop the entrance with a new canopy-style façade. The current entrance, according to the local community paper, the *Midland Reporter*, is "poorly articulated" with the new extensions "announcing the main entrance with greater clarity" (2010).

²⁰ The theatre was renamed in honour of Geoff Gibbs, former principal of WAAPA, in 2006.

²¹ Nick Enright was an Australian playwright.

²² Interview with Julie Warne 14th October 2008 Perth WA

²³ Official newsletter of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University. Issue 1. March 2008.

I was not granted permission to view course documents, but the website clearly states that the acting program trains students as an ensemble:

The ensemble develops performance skills in acting, voice, and movement by exploring a wide range of works and performance styles, as well as through improvisation, and devising original works.

Whilst theatre is the core focus of the course, students are also trained in acting for television, film and radio.²⁴

WAAPA more than any other mainstream acting program is looking at developing opportunities for actors to train in other mediums such as; screen, television, and radio. This is mainly due to the perceived lack of employment prospects for actors trained only for theatre. Careers in television and screen are seen by WAAPA as providing a more sustainable livelihood for acting graduates.

This overview of the three mainstream actor training programs, NIDA VCA, and WAAPA provides a picture of how they have all grown significantly since their inception, both in their physical infrastructure, and through the programs they now offer. If Lindy Davies is right, and buildings do reflect the form and the content of their programs, then the mainstream institutions reflect their own importance as places where something big happens. The growing status of the institutes is also reflected and reinforced by the millions of dollars spent on renovations, and their subsequent grandiose buildings. This is coupled with the discourse on actor-training that surrounds

²⁴ WAAPA website. URL: www.waapa.ecu.edu.au/courses_and_administration/

these institutes. The discourse focuses not on the methodologies employed and their significance to actor-training; instead much of what is invested in is the status of the actor as a “professional”. The industry promotes this recognition by issuing a Union card on graduation. This card enables newly minted graduates the right to professional (paid) work. As I now shift the focus to over viewing the Aboriginal–identified actor training programs I will begin with the writings on and about Indigenous actor-training in Australia. I then also provide, in Chapter 4 a description of the buildings and environment that contain these programs.

Aboriginal-identified acting programs in Australia

To date most of what has been written about Australian actor-training and theatre practice is dominated by European and American discourses on theatre, and focuses on mainstream actor-training and the specificity of particular acting practices. Indigenous acting and theatre practices are mostly viewed, according to Maryrose Casey, as derivative of or secondary to this discourse (2000, p. 29). The lack of written material on Indigenous actor training supports Casey's claim.

In this section I will discuss two texts on Indigenous theatre in Australia, both of which discuss training. These are; Maryrose Casey's, *Creating Frames* (2004), and Raymond Robinson's Masters Thesis "Dreaming Tracks: History of the Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Scheme, 1972–1979" (2000). Two other journal articles relate specifically to actor-training for Indigenous actors, and these include my article "The Bennelong Complex" (Syron, 2008), and "Indigenous Performing Arts Training in Australia" (Milne, 2010). The latter is a transcript of an interview between myself, and Geoffrey Milne, where we discuss the role of culture and pedagogy in the training for Indigenous actors.

Casey's book is an historical and socio-political perspective on the reception of Indigenous theatre practice, focusing on the development of Black theatre in Australia. Robinson's thesis is a history of Aboriginal dance in Australia. This history is intertwined with the "black theatre" movement, which led to the establishment of Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs across the country. From these two historical accounts I will briefly trace the rise of the Aboriginal-identified actor programs nationally.

According to Casey, black theatre groups emerged across the country as early as 1968. What followed was the formation of the Black Theatre Group in Sydney, which produced their first show *Basically Black* in 1972. Also in 1972 Nindethana²⁵ produced *Jack Charles is up and Fighting* in Melbourne. In Brisbane a black theatre group formed in 1973 that would later become Kooemba Jdarra, and in 1978 in Perth, Western Australia Noongar²⁶ theatre appeared. Aboriginal people ran these companies, and Aboriginal people acted, directed and produced shows. The significance of the establishment of Indigenous theatre companies was twofold. It facilitated the training of Aboriginal actors, (up to this time in Australia's history, Aboriginal roles were played by non-Aboriginal actors who 'blackened up' to play them), but more importantly it helped Aboriginal people draw attention to the broader social issues of the Aboriginal experience in Australia. As Casey notes, "the same activists fighting for social justice were involved in these theatre/performance-based activities" (2004, p. 44). Robinson also argues that the 'Aboriginal movement' was a driving force behind the emergence of these companies, with many of the Black Theatre productions, taking a very political bent in shows like those mentioned above.

Indigenous theatre rose from a turbulent time in Australian politics. It was five years after the 1967 national referendum to include Aboriginal people in the census. There was much unrest between Aboriginal people and the Australian government on issues of land rights, equal pay, self-determination, and adequate services to remote

²⁵ "Nindethana" in Koorie (Aboriginal people from south-east Victoria) Aboriginal dialect means "place of gathering".

²⁶ "Noongar" (and its variant spelling) is the contemporary name given to Aboriginal people of Western Australia.

communities. Then there was the establishment of Tent Embassy in 1972, a protest outside Parliament House in Canberra, which brought wider attention to these concerns.

In 1972, an African-American dancer Carol Johnson (from the Eleo Pomare Dance Company, Harlem, New York) came to Australia to perform at the Adelaide Festival. On her arrival, Johnson was so moved by the Tent Embassy protests, and by the issues affecting Aboriginal people, she felt compelled to get involved in local Aboriginal politics. She did so in the only way she knew how, and that was to set up a dance course for the local community in Redfern.

Johnson's dance classes complemented an existing acting program run by local Aboriginal activists including Paul Coe (who later set up the Aboriginal Legal Service). Coe wanted Aboriginal people to have the confidence to tell their stories, and to articulate their experiences. He also understood the importance for many Aboriginal people living in urban areas to reconnect with Culture. Performance practices were, for Coe, the way to address many of his ideas, and so he set up workshops for the local community in 1972, providing both training in acting as well as an engagement with Cultural practices. By 1974 the Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre (BTACC) in Regent Street started running more structured acting and dance workshops for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The BTACC ran a six-week program in cultural and performing arts training delivered by Johnson (dance) and Brian Syron (acting). The BTACC students were exposed to the acting methodologies of American training,²⁷ which was complemented

²⁷ Brian's approach to acting and to teaching was influenced by his time in New York with Stanislavski disciple Stella Adler.

by an engagement with Cultural subjects by visiting Cultural practitioners. Casey describes this approach:

A focus on training, particularly culturally specific training, was a central platform for the Black Theatre artists for the same reasons it had been for Nindethana. Workshops in the performing and visual arts were conducted at the centre. Further to the issues of professional development, there was a strong belief in the Redfern community that the experience and training offered at the centre would develop confidence and potential (2004, p. 98).

Casey's book and Robinson's thesis both indicate that there were three main agendas driving the formation of actor-training for Indigenous Australians during the latter part of the 1970s. These were: the rights of Aboriginal people to represent themselves, to practice their Culture, and to run their own programs. Robinson notes:

The strong connection between politics and cultural issues brought real purpose to the beginnings of urban dance and drama in Sydney. In many ways because the theatre and dance of this time came from a place of community purpose and function, this was much like traditional culture, with strength coming from reason and purpose for the dance as it relates to community (2000, p. 32).

There are also two significant points made here by both Casey and Robinson. The first is that for Aboriginal people, a meaningful engagement with Culture was central to actor training. The second is that the Aboriginal-identified programs and colleges that emerged from grass roots beginnings and a close engagement with surrounding communities need to maintain these connections in order to continue to draw from these communities and to provide relevant and meaningful Cultural experiences to students.

Summary

I set out in this chapter to discuss the socio-political histories of both mainstream and Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs. From this discussion it is clear that the factors that underpin these two histories are very different. What drove the formation of the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs was a social imperative, but equally it was to provide an engagement with Culture, including a strong connection to community. Mainstream programs, on the other hand are for the most part heavily influenced by, in geographical terms at least, distant cultures like the American and English theatre practices and cultural models. The aims of mainstream programs are, I suggest, the validation of acting as work, and their graduates as professionals.

The publicly funded mainstream actor-training institutes, although starting out at more modest sites, are now imposing, celebrated, and purpose built structures. The Aboriginal acting programs by comparison are run out of more modest dwellings, which is suggestive of their status, and which contributes to their perceived difference from or secondary to the programs on offer at mainstream actor training sites.

What both Casey and Robinson agree on is that Aboriginal actor-training programs came about not from a history of acting practice, but more because of local politics. In the chapter that follows I will consider and outline the moments in history that contributed to the rise of Aboriginal education in Australia. At the end of chapter 4 I will then present an overview of the three main Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs currently operating nationally. This will include a description of the physical environment and structures that house these programs.

CHAPTER 4

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

And the past cannot be dead because it is built into the beings and bodies of the living. We do not need to re-find the past, because our subjectivities, our being in the world are inseparable from the past. Aboriginalities of today are regenerations and transformations of the spirit of the past, not literal duplications of the past; we recreate Aboriginality in the context of all our experiences, including our pre-colonial practices, our oppression, and our political struggles.²⁸

Introduction

From the writings reviewed in the previous chapter about the history of Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs, as with the mainstream training programs, the socio-political context of the day played a significant role in their establishment. I argued, however, that mainstream actor-training programs in Australia have generally developed in ways that reflect the practice of theatre as being for the most part, professional artistic activity. By contrast, the Aboriginal-identified acting programs are very much tied to a connection to Culture and community, and they continue to maintain these connections to their grass roots beginnings. Aboriginal programs also

²⁸ Dodson, M. (1994). The End in the Beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality Speech by Michael Dodson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner at the Wentworth Lecture, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994. From Australian Human Rights Commission.

URL:http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/social_justice/end_in_the_beginning.html200. Mick Dodson is a Yawuru man from Western Australia.

emerged from a wider socio-political context, one which relates specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples nationally, and Indigenous peoples globally. These local and international influences that led to, and provide the impetus for the emergence of an identifiable Aboriginal educational context in Australia is what I will now examine more closely in the first half of this chapter.

Aboriginal Australians have in the past struggled to have their history heard. And although the past begins in a pre-colonial era, I begin with the arrival of the English to Australian shores, as it was they who brought with them changes to Aboriginal peoples lives that would forever mark Aboriginal history. In starting with the colonial era, I move quickly into the 20th century, as it is at this time that many significant and influential international social and political reforms were ratified. It was also a time when governments of the day, inspired by the research of many dedicated educators and scholars, changed policy directions in the area of education for Aboriginal people. However, some of these changes, although progressive, were not and are not progressive enough. Radical reform in approaches to Aboriginal education can, I argue, only be achieved from listening to the lessons of the past, and to the voices of the past, many of whom I echo and embed throughout this chapter. In arriving at the present time I will, in the second half of this chapter, examine the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs. I do this in the same way I approached that of introducing the mainstream programs in the previous chapter, by outlining the structure of the courses on offer, and by describing the physical environments in which these programs operate.

Past policies: political and societal foundations

As this thesis focuses on the area of actor training, I will limit my discussion to the educational context in Australia and the Aboriginal experience of it. Some of these events and stories took place over two hundred years ago, but are documented history. I begin by outlining the history of contact between Aboriginal people and Western “education” in Australia.

In this early part of our history, there was a substantial amount of effort made by the colonists to encourage local Aboriginal communities of the Sydney area to adopt and learn the English language, as well as the customs and values that colonists brought with them. There is no record of any formal training facility in NSW before the early 1800s. By 1814 however, the then Governor of NSW, Lachlan Macquarie, resolved that the only way the local Aboriginal people were going to fit into the emerging new world, forged by the continued presence of settlers into Australia, was by some form of formal instruction. A missionary and merchant, William Shelly,²⁹ was commissioned by Macquarie to set up a local school for just this purpose. Unfortunately these two men had very different ideas about the way this should be done. According to JJ Fletcher’s account of Aboriginal education in Australia, *Clean Clad and Courteous*, Macquarie wanted to foster better relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, while Shelly seemed more intent on “civilising Aborigines” (1989, p. 70). Both of these programs failed. That failure was seen as the result of the inability of Aboriginal people to learn. Therefore little effort was made after these formal attempts

²⁹ Shelly, a missionary and trader, was invited by Macquarie to draw up plans for the Native Institution at Parramatta, NSW. He was later appointed as superintendent and principal instructor of the school by the NSW Governor. (n.d.). *About NSW*. Retrieved 15 August 2009 from NSW Government: <http://about.nsw.gov.au/collections/doc/william-shelley/>.

to “educate” the local Aboriginal population. With the arrival of the missionaries in the 1840s, the responsibility was handed over to them.

By 1883 colonial governments established Aboriginal Protection Boards to provide security to, and care of, local Aboriginal communities, who were becoming increasingly vulnerable to the encroachment of settler territories.³⁰ According to the official NSW state records, the primary function of the Boards, which at this stage had no statutory power, was to supervise the interests of Aboriginal people. In 1909 with the introduction of the *Aborigines Protection Act*, the Board’s powers were extended to the general supervision and care over *all* matters affecting the interests and welfare of Aboriginal people.³¹ These boards were granted statutory power to place in “custody” all Aboriginal children believed to be in moral or physical danger. Any child deemed part Aboriginal, half-caste, quarter-caste, octoroon or persons of “admixture” were removed from their communities and families under this Act. Many of the children were placed in designated mission homes or state care facilities like Kinchella Boys Home (1924–1970), or the Mission Schools that operated at Purfleet Reserve (1903 - 1952), or the Parramatta School for Girls in Sydney (1887–1974)³². Some of these mission schools later became reformatory schools, where many young Aboriginal boys and girls were placed in state care. At these facilities, the Aboriginal children were offered a variety of educational opportunities.

³⁰ The Board’s policy was based on a belief that “protection” of Aborigines would lead to their “advancement” to the point where they would eventually fit into the white community. (<http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/Barani/themes/theme3.htm>). Scholars such as Malcolm Prentis (2008), however, have different views about the functions of these boards, claiming they were interventionist with their primary purpose being land acquisition. Archives in Brief 42–Aborigines Welfare Board, 1883–1969. www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives

³⁰The Aboriginal Protection Act, (1909) can be found at URL: (<http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/sessionalview/sessional/act/1909-25.pdf>)

³² The Parramatta School for Girls also housed non-Aboriginal girls.

There were three types of education on offer for Aboriginal people during this time: segregated mission schools; segregated external (off mission) schools; and the mainstream school system. The off segregated external schools were effectively akin to workforce training for Aboriginal children as domestics, and for station hand roles. Nuns and clerics mostly ran the mission schools. In rural areas of the state, station owners rather than missionaries often ran many of the missionary schools, with most being mission “schools” in name only. By the 1940s, many of the mission schools were closed down, influenced by changes in government policies that focused more on “assimilation”³³ and the Aboriginal children were subsequently moved into the mainstream schooling system. However, many of the mainstream schools were simply unsuited for, and inadequately prepared to integrate primarily mission-raised children. The Aboriginal experience of the mainstream schools during the early to mid 1900s indicated that Aboriginal children had a very difficult time of it, and that they were systematically rejected by the education system (McConnochie.1982, p. 23). In addition, according to Fletcher (1989), there was a sustained campaign by the parents of non-Aboriginal students to drive Aboriginal students out of the mainstream programs. Some of the justifications given for this were that Aboriginal students had little or no “morals”, that they used lurid and disgusting language, they had dirty heads, and that they hindered the progress of the other [non-Aboriginal] students (Fletcher, 1989, p. 139).

³³ At the *Native Welfare Conference* (1937), state and federal governments decided that Aboriginal children should be provided with the same educational opportunities as all Australians, and their subsequent employment should be under the same conditions as mainstream Australia. This became known as the “Assimilation Policy”.

As non-citizens, many Aboriginal people remained corralled and controlled by the policies of governments for most of the 1900s. There was little change in the lives of many Aboriginal communities especially in the area of education. Then after 1945, with the end of World War II and the newly formed United Nations, there was a growing interest in the rights of all peoples. In 1948 the Declaration of Human Rights was established, which states in its preamble that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. For Australia, becoming a signatory to this declaration meant a major shift in Government thinking about the rights and freedoms of Aboriginal people. This thinking led to the granting of citizenship rights for Aboriginal people in 1948. Principles of the past like segregation still existed, but there was a new focus on moving all Aboriginal children (not just those of mixed-descent) into mainstream education programs (however problematic that was for governments and schools). Then in 1962, an American psychologist, Frank Riessman, interested in students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in America, published *The Culturally Deprived Child*, a book that changed the way many Western educators approached the schooling of students from different cultural backgrounds (non-Western).

Riessman linked education to economic outcomes, claiming that education was the vehicle for improving conditions not only for the marginalised, but also for the USA as a whole. For Riessman, “cultural deprivation” was the failure of institutions and not the students. He claimed that Western knowledge systems discriminated against “other” cultural knowledges, such as those which students learn from “within”

their own communities. Culture in this context represents those underlying environmental factors that impact on the learning abilities and inadequacies displayed by students from identified disadvantaged communities. Riessman also claims that most teachers and schools do not know enough about cultures other than their own often overlooking, and underestimating the skills and intellectual functioning that arise from a student's own community culture (Riessman, 1963, p. 5). He argues that students from different backgrounds, poor or lower socio-economic students, are not slow learners. Nor are they stupid. Instead, Riessman claimed that they simply learn differently (1963, p. 31). The Riessman 'effect' also influenced the way Australian educational policy makers thought about the education of, and economic outcomes for, Aboriginal people.

In 1966, the Australian Government became a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Built on the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenant states that:

All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (1966, Article 1:1).

This statement suggests that self-determination contributes to a sense of empowerment for those subjugated societies and cultures throughout the colonised world. And that the right to choose one's future is intrinsic to the freedom of all citizens of the world. As a principle in educational reform, the concept of self-determination defines the

right for Aboriginal people to practise their own education and Culture as they see fit according to their own social practices.

These global social-political movements of the late 1940s to the 1960s, contributed to major social and political reforms in Australia. These included the 1967 Australian referendum for Aboriginal people to be included in the census, plus the introduction of the *Aborigines Act* of 1969, which subsequently abolished the Aboriginal Welfare Boards. After the referendum, the Federal Government took control of the administration of Aboriginal Affairs, hastily introducing special educational schemes including: the formation of a National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), an Aboriginal advisory organisation with new powers to develop, in consultation with states and territories, policy directions; and the introduction of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme (ABSEG). With the Federal Government now in charge of policy directions in Aboriginal education, the states and territories no longer carried the entire financial burden, but were responsible for compliance with and implementation of these policies. This situation continues today.

Then in the 1970s, far away from Canberra bureaucrats, a lone ethnographer, Stephen Harris, was examining the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students engage with Western knowledge systems in a small Aboriginal community called Milingimbi, located just off the coast of Arnhem Land, 400 kilometres east of Darwin in the Northern Territory. His research came to shape the way future governments would approach Aboriginal education into the next century. In his book, *Two-way Aboriginal Schooling: Education and Cultural Survival* (Harris, 1990), Harris claimed that from his experience of the Milingimbi community, he believed that Aboriginal

learning contexts were essentially culturally different to the Western educational paradigm. He states:

The Aboriginal domain has different priorities [than Western education] to strengthen Aboriginal identity and to maintain distinctive Aboriginal ways of doing, feeling, learning and believing, and to 'hold' Aboriginal knowledge (1990, p.149).

For Harris, the Aboriginal student's specific needs are closely linked to Culture, and they require some schooling in a separate Cultural framework in order to negotiate Western learning contexts. He proposes a two-way system, one Western, the other, Aboriginal. He claims that this two-way educational paradigm has multiple applications. He states:

A two-way system provides the skills and knowledge from both cultures to be learnt; all involving a source of knowledge, a style of doing things, and learning contexts, which match each body of knowledge (1990, p14).

Harris and other educators believe that Aboriginal people should define the aims and purpose of Aboriginal school contexts. An Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school system is one where Aboriginal teachers and administrators run the programs. In this context, Aboriginal learners engage with

Western knowledges without compromising their own Cultural values. In Australia it is governments who define the educational priorities, and Aboriginal students and teachers must engage with mainstream educational systems at some point in their lives. As Harris suggests, the Western domain is not better, just inescapable (1990, p149). Harris's research was a boost to the establishment of Aboriginal community-run schools both in the Northern Territory, and in other parts of the nation. His work also contributed to a greater understanding of the many issues and challenges Aboriginal learners face in different cultural contexts.

Similarly, in *Cultural Pedagogy* (1992), American pedagogue, David Trend argues that there are two types of pedagogy at work in institutional settings; "assimilationist" and "separatist". Although Trend bases much of his work on the American school system, there are some similarities with an Australian educational framework. "Assimilationist pedagogy" is for Trend, the delivery of a single culture to which all groups should subscribe, asserting one culture over another (1992, p. 21). In Australia, that culture is mostly based on Eurocentric traditions, much like in America. Alternatively, "separatist" pedagogy is based on group-specific knowledge, or, local knowledge. Harris takes "separatist" pedagogy a step further and asserts that pedagogy *through* culture (local) is a more meaningful way to navigate these pedagogical experiences for many Aboriginal learners.

By the 1980s, governments got serious about tackling some of the issues effecting the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. There were two key reports commissioned by government at this time. The "Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs" (Miller, 1985), also known as the

“Miller report”, claimed that if governments were genuine about improving the economic conditions of Aboriginal people, then education needed to be seen as the vehicle for this, and that governments needed to start thinking beyond the secondary school system (Miller. 1985, p. 12). Further, the report argued that Aboriginal people need to be empowered to take control of their own futures (Miller. 1985, p. 3). The second report, “Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Taskforce (Hughes, 1988), also known as the “Hughes report”, emphasized human rights with the recommendation that a fundamental objective of any new approach should be to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education by the turn of the 21st century (1988, p. 2).

Both Mick Miller, who was a secondary school teacher from Cairns, and Paul Hughes, who studied education at Harvard are Aboriginal. Both reports were considered in the establishment of the first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) in 1989. The key points of the NATSIEP call for: increased funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education; cooperation between state and federal ministers to bring about a more coordinated approach between various educational sectors; and support for the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum in the primary and secondary school sectors.

Criticisms of the approaches advocated in the NATSIEP mostly come from Aboriginal people themselves. This is because governments continued to support only those programs that encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to engage in Western educational contexts. They did not embrace the principles of two-way

education. Further, according to the “Review and Analysis of Literature relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education” (Bin-Sallik, 1994), any Aboriginal subjects taught in Western educational contexts are at best “add ons” to an established unchanged mainstream system (1994, p. 12). Further, institutes and policy makers continually shy away from historical factors, such as institutionalised racism, that in Martine Nakata’s view continue to impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (1994, p. 13). Another criticism of the NATSIEP is that governments continue to focus on statistical outcomes rather than supporting and employing programs driven and developed by Aboriginal people.

The history of Aboriginal education in Australia highlights many of the social and political reforms, both national and international, that have impacted on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. From policies of control and authority over the freedoms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to what can be observed today with the adoption of more progressive principles like self-determination, there are still many challenges, but progress is evident. Over the last 40 years changes to various policies brought about, at least in part, by the research of scholars like Riessman and Harris, and by the work Miller and Hughes, have contributed to the rise of specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified programs nationally. Key principles outlined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and in the Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights have also contributed to governments supporting the development of these programs. Aboriginal-identified programs (including actor-training) are unique educational contexts. They emerged from years of struggle against a prevailing system that is, I

argue, implicitly designed for the reproduction of particular cultural norms, and the maintenance of social and political hierarchies. All the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs included in this research share this common history. I now present the three Aboriginal colleges where actor-training occurs, Eora College, ACPA, and WAAPA's Aboriginal Theatre course.

Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs

Aboriginal-identified programs and institutes are mostly based on the principles of self-determination and self-management. They emerged from Aboriginal community programs originally designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Their primary focus is the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These programs generally have core subjects in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture, history and/or values. Many are governed by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board or closely monitored by an Aboriginal advisory body. They also employ a significant number of Aboriginal teachers and lecturers.

In the following section I will present an overview, similar to that of the mainstream institutes in the previous section, by describing the physical structures in which these programs are based, and by outlining a brief history of the three Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs: Eora College, the Aboriginal Theatre course at WAAPA and ACPA. Other Indigenous performance-based programs also exist, like the Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts program, the Karratha Community Performing Arts program in Western Australia, and a program at the

Carclew Youth Arts in South Australia. However, these programs are generally project based, or run by local community development programs. They do not offer ongoing specifically accredited courses in acting or performance training. They do, however, play a significant role in the actor-training sector because these programs have a rural and remote reach.³⁴ However, as one of the focuses of this research is to consider the institution of actor training, I will now examine the three Aboriginal-identified accredited actor-training programs that are run out of institutions. I will also provide a snapshot of the student population, plus the pedagogy employed by each program and I examine the course structures. I begin with the Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts where I worked for ten years as the Performing Arts Coordinator and Lecturer.

Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts

Eora College takes its name from the language of the Gadigal people who lived and still live in the Sydney area of NSW. Eora means ‘people’, or people of the area. Eora College began as a community-run program led by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and activists in the early 1970s. Eora is the oldest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual and performing arts program on offer nationally.

In chapter 3 I outlined much of Eora’s history in the section on actor-training in Australia. Briefly, in 1984 the Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre renamed itself the Eora Centre, introducing general education subjects, such as literacy and numeracy, to a performing arts program. The education subjects included as part of the new Eora

³⁴ Carclew delivers programs to the Pitjantjatjara people on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands in South Australia.

performing arts program were developed in association with more established mainstream adult learning organisations such as TAFE NSW, while the Cultural aspects continued to be delivered by either visiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists or by members of the local Aboriginal community who had knowledge in this area. At the Eora Centre, a student could focus on one field of artistic expression, or explore a wide variety of skills and knowledges. There were also non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists who contributed to Eora's short existence as a community college. Former student Pam Young recalls:

There was Bob Merritt and he ran the acting classes. He got in some drama teachers. We had George Ogilvie, he did mime. Then, we had Karen [surname not specified], who did movement. There were Australian actors who came in like Jack Thompson, and others. Brian [Syron] your uncle came in along with Justine Saunders, and Uncle Bob Maza, another one of our drama teachers. Bryan Brown came in too. Rhoda Roberts and Lydia Miller came in as guests later too.³⁵

When I asked Pam to discuss how and where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture sat within the course programs she had this to say:

There was some Culture stuff but it was informal. The workshops were more routine, and they tried to teach us how to fit into the

³⁵ In interview with Pam Young, Eora College, Redfern, 29 October 2008.

mainstream. The Culture came with visiting guests and amongst students. If we didn't have it that way then I think the mainstream would have scared us off a bit. We still need something that linked us to our identity. When we feel secure in that, then we could learn to be secure in the mainstream.³⁶

The Eora Centre was fully taken over by TAFE NSW Sydney Institute in 1994, moving to a much larger building- a converted shoe factory- located on Abercrombie Street, Chippendale. Renamed the Eora College of Aboriginal Education, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts, it currently offers both Aboriginal and mainstream subjects. The college is for the most part a very good education complex. There are two floors. The ground floor walls are currently painted salmon with brown wave-like lines that glide across them. The walls are lined with a collection of framed artworks made by Indigenous students and purchased over the years by the college. This contributes to the sense of it being an environment defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Heaters (in cold weather) and televisions welcome the early morning arrivals, framed by giant pylons that guard the entrance. These heaters and TVs turn off at nine. To the right of the main doorway is a fully functioning theatre space that boasts a lighting rig, a large video screen, and seating for up to 120 patrons. To the left of the large open plan foyer is the front office. A Counselor's office, a library, a staff room, an executive staff and management area, a kitchen for students, and the office of a full-time student officer frame the foyer area. Also on the ground

³⁶ In Interview with Pam Young, Eora College, Redfern, 29 October 2008.

floor are two small music rehearsal rooms, a large dance/movement studio, plus a music computer room. Outside is a small courtyard for smokers.

The first floor of Eora College has two large general purpose classrooms, a computer room, a video studio and edit suite, an enormous painting and drawing section, a sculpture space, and lastly a printmaking area that holds a giant antique press. All in all the college is quite roomy and well equipped. These facilities, equipment, and technologies are largely supplied out of TAFE resources. More importantly the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF)³⁷ requires this infrastructure be available for the delivery of the specific programs that Eora delivers. However, even with all these spaces the building always seems to be bulging at the seams, with all classrooms fully booked throughout the year for the variety of subjects offered.

The student population at Eora consists of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, with about 400 hundred odd students enrolled each year, with over half of this number being Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander. When asked about the Eora student population then College Director, Darryl Griffen had this to say:

Originally it was 100% Aboriginal, now it is not. It is about 69% Aboriginal, at the moment. I did the math the other day. We have 410 enrolments and of that, 265 are Aboriginal in certificate three [level courses] and above.³⁸

³⁷ AQTF was the national set of standards for consistent high quality training and assessment services for clients in the vocational sector.

³⁸ In interview with Darryl Griffen, College Director, Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts, Redfern, 8 September 2009.

Enrolling non-Indigenous students at Eora is a result of being incorporated into the TAFE system, which does not have a mandate to provide Aboriginal-only educational programs. Another reasons for this is that the local Aboriginal population in Redfern has slowly shifted towards the Western regions of the Sydney area.

Eora College is a unique example of an identified school in Australia in that Aboriginal staff occupy all full-time 'identified' positions. Therefore, Eora College can advertise for and employ full-time Aboriginal staff.³⁹ Part-time teachers, however, are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Current NSW education policy dictates that all teachers must be trained in aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture.⁴⁰ Eora delivers this training to all TAFE staff across the Sydney Institute. Eora essentially assists TAFE by not only reaching the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student targets set by national and state government policies, but also by educating non-Indigenous TAFE staff on Aboriginal history, Culture, and heritage. Then College Director Griffen sees his role as facilitating these directives.

For Griffen, the changing role of Eora has shifted from being primarily programs designed specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to one that now offers both mainstream and Aboriginal programs. It also accepts increasingly more numbers of non-Aboriginal students. He describes these changes as being a move from an Indigenous focus to one that is non-Indigenous focused. He argues that mainstreaming Indigenous issues and students creates an environment that is not

³⁹ 'Aboriginality' is a genuine occupational qualification and is authorised by section 14 (126) of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act 1977.

⁴⁰ NSW Department of Education Aboriginal Education Policy 2008. "Mandatory Aboriginal cultural education through professional learning and career development experiences for all staff".

necessarily about Aboriginal students or issues, but more about how non-Indigenous staff and students engage with Aboriginal students and with Cultural principles. For Griffen, his job now is less about maintaining an exclusively Aboriginal focus and more about negotiating Aboriginal issues in a mainstream educational context.

The business of Eora is nonetheless focused on the education of Indigenous students. Although it delivers both identified and mainstream programs, it has a higher proportion of Indigenous students than non-Indigenous, which offers all students the opportunity to engage with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in an environment based on Aboriginal Cultural values, practices, and history. The majority of Indigenous staff are permanent employees and in leadership roles within the organisation. Eora's educational approach is based on the principles of self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, it still struggles to maintain its identity as an Aboriginal college within a larger state wide vocational context, which often demands a standardized approach to the delivery of certain programs. This will become clearer in the next chapter when I examine the place of Culture in actor-training. I now continue the introduction of the Aboriginal-identified actor training programs with the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts.

The Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts ACPA

ACPA, in Queensland, opened its doors as a registered training organisation in 1997. The college grew out of an Aboriginal music theatre training program in Brisbane that ran in the early 1990s and was run by Michael Leslie, a dancer, choreographer, and

activist. ACPA became a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) in 1997. It is a single member company limited by shares owned by the State of Queensland. The Queensland Department of Education and Training through its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learning and Arts Strategic Plan supports ACPA financially, as do other Queensland State government departments and private benefactors. ACPA is governed by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board of Directors. The Queensland government appoints the board members. As an RTO, ACPA may develop its own courses, which are accredited through the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). All vocational programs in Australia are approved and certified by this national framework.

Leslie's contribution to performing arts training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is largely unwritten. His early involvement in the 1980s was as a dance graduate from the Eora Centre in Redfern. Then as recipient of a Churchill Fellowship in 1981, he studied in the USA graduating from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Centre in New York City in 1983. On his return to Australia he ran the music theatre workshops for the first production of *Bran Nue Dae*.⁴¹ Some years later, he was instrumental in the creation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music theatre program in Perth. This course led to the establishment of the Aboriginal Theatre course now situated at WAAPA, which I review later. Leslie then formed a similar music theatre program in the Brisbane area for Aboriginal students, which subsequently led to the creation of ACPA at the Southbank campus. His other credits include being founding partner of NAISDA, and founding partner of Black Swan Theatre Company.

⁴¹ *Bran Nue Dae* is a musical written by Jimmy Chi in 1990. All songs were written and composed by Jimmy Chi, and members from the band Knuckles, and by Cezary Skubiszewski.

He is currently Director of the Michael Leslie Foundation for the Performing Arts in the Pilbara Region of North West Australia.

ACPA, at the time of this research was located at 27 Cordelia Street in South Brisbane. It moved to its new premises at Kangaroo Point in Brisbane on July 7th 2012. The new premises has four dance studios, two music studios, two studios for actors and new administration accommodation. Sheryl Sandy, Chairperson of ACPA, describes ACPA as the only organisation in Australia offering performing arts training across all genres - music, voice, dance and drama to young Indigenous people.⁴²

The Cordelia Street building I experienced is shared and owned by the Murri Mura Community Centre. The entrance was lined with rich green rainforest trees that created a warm, secure and mysterious approach. A hallway decorated in a mixture of red and pink paint ushered visitors toward an open doorway leading into a reception area where two desks with computers sat front and centre where the main administrative hub of the school was located. Seven brown desks were crammed into a small space where ACPA staff were concealed by imposing grey filing cabinets. Through this room to the right was where the executive staff resided. Three blue desks tightly skirted the back wall of a similarly small sized room. These rooms were bleak, equipped with what looks like borrowed furniture, reminding me of the popular functionalist philosophies of 1970s school designs. I sensed a familiar feel to this space, a feeling I experienced once while working in the early 1990s for a small non-government organisation in Darlinghurst. That feeling is burnout. Dedicated staff members were still hard at work late in the afternoon long after students had finished

⁴² <http://www.australianstage.com.au/201207165610/news/brisbane/new-home-for-aboriginal-centre-for-the-performing-arts.html>.

for the day, running off programs with second hand equipment and resources. The combination of long hours and outdated technology often leads to staff exhaustion. To be fair, this was not an attitude displayed by staff at ACPA. Rather, it is my interpretation of an organisation based on what I saw on that particular day.

Outside the administrative hub of ACPA were the classrooms. A long corridor lined with posters that read, 'this is your moment' led to a central staircase encircled by numerous doors. Upstairs were the student common rooms, a costume area that doubled as the dressing room and a computer room housed in an oddly oblong shaped space. The main classrooms were medium sized studios lined with mirrors on sprung flooring. The ceilings were oppressive as they hovered just above a small leap from above an student's head. This was not the ideal for a dance studio. Still, the joy that radiated from students who run and laugh along the passageways was infectious.

Full-time staff at ACAPA are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with the majority of leadership roles occupied by non-Indigenous staff. The student population generally consists of 99% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, although ACPA does accept applications from non-Indigenous students. The aims and vision of ACPA are, however, primarily geared toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as indicated by ACPA's vision statement:

The Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts is an inspirational centre of excellence and innovation in the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing arts, being the school of choice committed to the development of world class artists and embraces Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander cultural achievements and contributes to Australia's cultural identity.⁴³

ACPA's mission is the provision of a nurturing environment that celebrates excellence in contemporary performing arts practice and training, and which gives voice to emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. ACPA achieves its vision through the underpinning of its courses with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values such as respect, responsibility and relationships. These core organisational foundations essentially focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

With the move to the new Kangaroo Point premises, ACP is well positioned to continue to grow into a national performing arts college for Aboriginal students in all areas of performing arts. In the chapter that follows I examine in more detail the acting component of the ACPA program. I now present the Aboriginal Theatre program at WAAPA.

The Aboriginal Theatre course at WAAPA

The history of the Aboriginal Theatre course at WAAPA begins in the early 1990s with Michael Leslie, who after finishing choreography work on Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Day*, began music theatre workshops for Aboriginal people in Perth at the Black Swan Theatre. Ex-student Jadah Plieter (Milroy) describes the course as follows:

⁴³ A quote taken from the "Philosophy and Aims" document supplied by Penny Mullen, 2 April 2009, Brisbane, Queensland.

It was originally a three-month course that came out of *Bran Nue Dae*. The aim of that course was a bridging course for Aboriginal people to give them the skills to audition for the mainstream courses and main schools.⁴⁴

Around this time the Black Swan workshops in Perth were run by Michael Leslie, plus the acting and music theatre workshop program, run by Rick Brayford, was happening in Broome. Brayford is a non-Indigenous man who has trained Aboriginal people in acting and performance since the early 1990s, firstly as an English and media teacher at a local high school in Port Hedland, later in his appointment as the coordinator of a music theatre program in Broome, and currently in the role of coordinator for the Aboriginal Theatre program at WAAPA. Around 1995 he ran the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance program out of the Notre Dame University in Broome. The university appointed him because of his knowledge and experience working with the Aboriginal communities in the area in and around the Pilbara region. Brayford recalls the circumstances that led to the Broome program:

There was this thing happening after *Bran Nue Dae* finished, there were a whole lot of people who thought they were professionals. And to get them back into training was difficult because they wanted to be paid. There was a lot of talent running around but nobody had any technique or craft. This all happened within three years and Broome

⁴⁴ Phone interview with Jadah Plieter (Milroy), 31 October 2008.

was hot. This occurred even up to *Rabbit Proof Fence* with Evelyn [Sampi].⁴⁵ They came out of those experiences so mucked up. So we worked really hard at trying to engage this talent with the course that we were doing.⁴⁶

There were two Aboriginal performance courses running in the late 1990s in Western Australia, one in Broome run by Brayford, and the other in Perth run by Michael Leslie. Edith Cowan University then offered the Leslie acting program a permanent home in 1995 and engaged NIDA graduate, Bill McCluskey to oversee the move to the university campus. Since graduating from NIDA in 1978, McCluskey had worked in various theatres around Australia as an actor, a director and a playwright. He taught acting at WAAPA from 1995 to 2000. In 2000, at the request of the university, Brayford took over the running of the course from McCluskey. Brayford continues in this role today. Brayford is the only full-time staff assigned to the Aboriginal performance course.

When I caught up with Brayford he had just received notice that he was to be the 2008 recipient of the Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Education.⁴⁷ This award is usually given to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian, so on that day in October he was quite surprised and delighted to receive such an honour. It was in recognition of his contribution to Indigenous performing arts.

⁴⁵ Evelyn Sampi is an Aboriginal actress born in Derby, Western Australia. She won the 4th Annual Lexus International Film award for Best Actress for her role in *Rabbit Proof Fence* in 2002.

⁴⁶ In interview with Rick Brayford, Perth, 13 November 2008.

⁴⁷ The Australian Learning and Teaching Council of Australia manages the Neville Bonner Award for Excellence in Higher Education. It is an award for teaching excellence in Indigenous Education. Bonner (OA) became, in 1972, the first Indigenous Australian to be a member of the Australian Parliament.

The course in Aboriginal Theatre sits within the mainstream performing arts institute at WAAPA, a tertiary organisation that delivers a diverse range of courses in theatre practice across a variety of study areas. The Aboriginal Theatre course is currently housed on the Mount Lawley Campus, which lies alongside a small estuary of the Swan River only minutes by bus from Perth's centre. Its architecture consists of low-lying buildings providing shelter from the scorching hot days that mid summer brings to Perth, with temperatures that can reach above 40 degrees Celsius. The course facilities are humble (compared to those of the mainstream campus): a couple of studio spaces, which Brayford assured me, are set aside specifically for the course. Small glass and steel doors frame the entrance. The floors are covered in peach brown carpet, there are exposed dark brick walls, and a foyer that leads into two medium sized workshop studio areas. No posters line the walls; they are instead stark, sterile and institutional. It has a university feel with small areas set aside for teachers to work in solitude. Brayford occupies one such room, which houses two desks, a computer, a couple of chairs and the most important object in the room, a phone. The flow of students in and out of Brayford's office belies its function. There is no administrative support, but students have access to both WAAPA and the university student support services. The course student population is primarily Aboriginal.

Throughout the two days that I spent with Brayford, a consistent flow of Aboriginal students marched in and out of his office with administrative and personal needs, or they just wanted to hang out in his office until the workshops began. Throughout all of these interruptions, Brayford did not seem the least bit perturbed. Perhaps it was a Western Australian thing, or maybe it was Brayford's way of

introducing a less formal face to the university experience. Whatever it was, it made for a very personal engagement with Brayford, his students and the university itself. I will talk more about this course in the chapter that follows.

Summary

I set out in this chapter to overview the political and social background context that lead to the emergence of the Aboriginal-identified actor training programs in Australia. For Eora, ACPA, and the Aboriginal course at WAAPA, all emerged during a highly charged time in Australia's history. In examining each program, they all have similarly strong connections to Culture and or to community, and they continue to maintain these connections. However, particular challenges face each program. Eora struggles to maintain its identity as an Aboriginal college within a larger mainstream institute and vocational framework, as does the Aboriginal Theatre course at WAAPA. ACPA on the other hand has an Aboriginal board, a high percentage of Aboriginal students, and programs that incorporate Aboriginal Cultural components. However ACPA struggles to appoint Indigenous personnel in management roles and full time positions.

All of the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs discussed here, at the time of this research, were in some way significantly under-resourced. Although Eora has a fully functioning theatre, it does not have a technician to work it. Nor is there any budget for graduation performances. ACPA was clearly in need of workable studio rehearsal rooms and suitable administrative areas. It also needed the resources to attract more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professional staff to the college. The WAAPA course needs to employ a full-time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

position to work alongside Brayford. The facilities at WAAPA are in need of a renovation to reflect the identity of the program on offer as Aboriginal, so that students feel a sense of ownership and belonging, in the same way that many of the mainstream institutes hang pictures of previous student productions along their corridors walls.

What the dedicated individuals who work in these colleges and acting programs achieve with the resources provided is outstanding. I acknowledge that there are significant financial issues for every actor-training course and institute in this country. I also acknowledge that a significant amount of money has been allocated in recent years to Indigenous performance training colleges like NAISDA, and ACPA. However, one need only look at the facilities, administrative support, and production budgets of the mainstream actor-training programs and compare them with the Aboriginal-identified programs to see where the financial inequality exists.

I began this thesis by arguing that the similarities between mainstream and Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs are more striking than the differences between them, and that this is due in part to an overarching pedagogical framework in Australia. I also argued that a socio-political analysis of institutional histories can bring some light to the specific cultural frameworks that underpin each training context, which are sometimes explicit, while at other times implicit. In setting the social and political background and in identifying some of the influences that have contributed to the rise of institutional actor training in Australia, I have gently teased out some of these differences. In discussing each individual context that Indigenous students can potentially navigate during their studies to be an actor, I have also come to understand these differences more clearly.

I now return to the other key aims of the research. The second half of this thesis will focus on when, where and how Indigenous students are able to engage meaningfully or critically with issues of identity, culture, family, and professionalism, during the course of their vocational training. I will also investigate if the actor training programs and institutes, both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous, support students who, like their Indigenous role models in the performing arts, see Culture as a key resource in their approach to making theatre. This examination will, I suggest, offer some clarification of the differences that exist between the experiences of students at mainstream and at Aboriginal-identified institutions.

CHAPTER 5

THE LOCATION OF CULTURE IN ACTOR TRAINING

Introduction

Looking again, for example, at the case of Law whom I quoted at the outset of this thesis, the dominant position of mainstream theatre institutions clearly has exerted an influence on the way in which this Indigenous graduate thinks about his career prospects as an actor. Yet Law did not graduate from a mainstream actor-training program. It is not clear how he engaged with Culture while studying at an Aboriginal-identified program during his training, even though he clearly states the importance of Culture to his practice and training. In the second half of this thesis I will also examine where, when and how Indigenous students are able to engage meaningfully with Culture during the course of their vocational training, which will be informed mainly through the in-depth interviews conducted with Indigenous graduates from a selection of different actor-training programs, some of which are very strongly, and historically, “Aboriginal-identified” programs and some of which are offered by “mainstream” institutions. I will investigate key questions of where opportunities exist, and how opportunities arise to engage with Culture for Indigenous students during their training to be an actor.

I acknowledge, however, that the student experience of any pedagogical encounter is never independent of the teacher experience. Therefore, I also conducted several in-depth interviews with teachers, directors and other staff from the actor-training programs I was investigating. At no point however is the research seeking a

single understanding of the “right” way of training Indigenous actors. Rather, the thesis sets out to illuminate multiple perspectives on the topic.

Culture as practice

Indigenous culture is the basis of your identity. It is the world most of us are lucky to be born into, rich with traditional customs, language, natural talents (storytelling, painting/sculpture, dance and fashion), heritage and knowledge. In our chosen artistry, Indigenous culture is a powerful tool by making one strong, resourceful and creative with our peers and what we showcase to our audience.⁴⁸

For Banna Hankin, quoted here, Culture is enacted through the performance of identity. I therefore focus on the place of Culture in actor-training because it is my experience also (as a once a practicing actor and actor trainer) that notions of Culture and identity are central to Indigenous theatre and performance practice, a sentiment also expressed by the practicing actors, theatre makers and graduates I interviewed.

Evidence that Culture is central to the practice of acting for Indigenous Australians can also be deduced from statements made by theatre and performance makers themselves when discussing their practice. In an interview with Wesley Enoch, where he spoke about his own practice and processes of theatre making, he asserted that: “every Aboriginal play by definition needs to have cultural material being

⁴⁸ Banna Hankin is a Torres Strait Islander man and Eora acting graduate. He was not available to be interviewed during the research period. This quote is taken from his Facebook post, in response to the question, “what is Culture?” November 2010.

discussed, dealt with, referred to and enacted”.⁴⁹ Enoch articulates here that when he works with Aboriginal plays, knowledge of Cultural material and how it is used in performance practice is required. Aboriginal choreographer Stephen Page, in his Philip Parsons Lecture entitled “Kinship and Creativity”, reveals that his Cultural world is that which both links his contemporary life and his identity to his artistic practice. He states: “My beliefs and my connection to traditional Culture supports me through my journey in the art world” (Page, 2003, p. 116). For Page, knowledge of what he terms “traditional” Culture is something not only necessary, but central to his practice. The late Justine Saunders⁵⁰ when recollecting her journey as an actor commented:

You know, I have been to Germany, England, I have stood on stage in New York, I have been given an award, which I gave back, but Black Theatre reminds me of a wonderful culture of where I come from and support. That’s what it is to me. ⁵¹

For Saunders, acting at the Black Theatre in Redfern not only reminded her of her roots (a small Aboriginal community in Queensland), but also provided her with a sense of connection to that Culture. Working in Black theatre was not just a place to connect; it also gave her a feeling of support and strength when exploring new experiences.

In the statements from Enoch, Page and Saunders, Culture is perceived as that

⁴⁹ In interview with Wesley Enoch, Sydney, 2002.

⁵⁰ Justine Saunders is a Woppaburra woman from Keppel Island in Queensland. She first appeared on the Australian stage as Ruby in *The Cake Man* by Robert Merrit at the Black Theatre, Redfern in 1975.

⁵¹ In interview with Justine Saunders, October 2003, Sydney, NSW.

which not only needs particular consideration when making any Aboriginal work, but sometimes also something that will most likely be incorporated into the practice of Aboriginal theatre and performance making. Culture is also that which gives strength to individual artists and gives them a base for further exploration of other practices.

When I interviewed Indigenous acting graduates on Culture and its significance to actor training, most agreed that it was central to not only their training experience, but that it would have a central role to play in their practice after graduating. Even though the majority of graduates began their careers at an Aboriginal acting program, graduates from the Aboriginal-identified programs who did not go on to study at a mainstream program felt more strongly about this than those who went on to study at mainstream programs. Indigenous graduates (of mainstream programs), on the other hand, felt that Culture was not relevant to the actor-training they had received. Most graduates, however, did acknowledge that Culture was important to their performance practice in some way or another.

ACPA and Eora graduate Law believes strongly that his role as an Aboriginal actor is to not only to tell narratives from his heritage and Culture, but to also represent Aboriginal people in mainstream acting settings. Law is one of the few acting graduates who did not choose to further his career through mainstream actor training; he went on to study at another identified training program. ACPA graduate Carmen Attel, a descendant of the Goenpul people from Stradbroke Island in Queensland, also acknowledged that Culture is important in actor-training for Indigenous students, but sees it as problematic due to the diversity of Cultures that exist in different language

groups across Australia. More importantly, Attel articulated that it was both skills development and Culture together that inform her practice. She states:

Culture is important. Knowing your history. I know that depending on where you are from is different and that is a problem for a standardised curriculum. But, it should be of equal weight to your skills. The opportunity should be there to seek out your particular Culture and how you would use that in your training. How you use your skills and Culture together in the work you do is important, whether that is in the community or in theatres.⁵²

For Attel it is in the balance of Cultural knowledge, plus an understanding of the place of Culture to one's own practice, as well as the right skills development that contributes to a model for the training of Indigenous actors and theatre makers. However, is not clear if these three elements are actually delivered at ACPA. Both Law and Attel articulate a practice developed only after graduating, and in that reflection they reveal and describe their ideal actor-training experience.

In what follows, I will examine when, where and how opportunities exist for Indigenous students to engage with Culture during their training to be an actor. I begin with an overview of the training programs on offer at both the Aboriginal-identified colleges and the mainstream training institutes. I also look at curriculum documents to determine where institutes include (if at all) Culture within their training programs.

⁵² In interview with Carmen Attel, 2 April 2009.

Alongside this, I include the responses from graduates, from staff and from teachers of institutes on their understanding of where Culture belongs (or not) in actor training. I begin now with the Aboriginal-identified programs, Eora, ACPA and Aboriginal Theatre at WAAPA.

Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs

Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts

Eora has two educational sections: 'General Education' and 'Arts and Media'. General education subjects range from certificate to diploma level programs, and the majority of courses run out of the section have strong core units in Cultural subjects. The entry-level general education programs cater specifically for students who struggled with the mainstream educational system in one way or another, that is, those who did not complete their schooling and who want to re-engage with education and learning. The Cultural subjects embedded in these courses include; Aboriginal identity, Aboriginal cultural expression, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and Aboriginal history. Indigenous teachers mostly teach these subjects. Although these programs are open enrollment, they are primarily populated by Aboriginal students.

The Arts and Media section at Eora oversees the delivery of the visual and performing arts courses. The visual arts courses are specifically designed for Indigenous students, and include similar subjects to the general education programs such as; Aboriginal identity, Aboriginal cultural expression, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and Aboriginal history. The difference is that these subjects are taught from a visual art perspective. Some staff at Eora see this course as a "relic of the

old days” when the Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre had strong political and Cultural connections. This perception is attributed to the inclusion of these Cultural subjects in comparison to other programs at Eora that don’t, which I will discuss shortly. It is interesting, however, that these programs, which only Aboriginal students can enroll in, are considered “relics” when it is these particular programs that contribute to Eora’s profile as an Aboriginal College. I would argue that Eora needs to maintain and secure these programs if it is to maintain its identity as Aboriginal for reasons I now explain.

The performance-based courses on offer at Eora are, on the other hand, mostly mainstream in design. These programs include; Music Performance and Practice, Theatre Performance and Practice, and Music Theatre. They are skill based programs that have no specific subjects in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture, theatre, music, or performance practice. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can enroll in these programs. Teachers of these courses are also both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with some programs having more non-Indigenous teachers than others. When I delivered the theatre course I made every effort to employ Indigenous staff. Sometimes however, as with similar programs, this is not always possible. The situation of an Aboriginal college, where the structure of the program is mainstream, where there are no Indigenous teachers, and where there are only some Indigenous students would, I argue, reduce the opportunity for Cultural exchange to take place. This situation also compromises any inclusion of an Indigenous perspective in the delivery of a program. At Eora, as well as at other Aboriginal training contexts, an

Indigenous perspective is seen as a given, and it is, I will argue, if there are Aboriginal teachers and trainers involved in the delivery of that program.

When asked if any Indigenous performance perspectives were incorporated into the delivery of programs at Eora, then College Director Darryl Griffen replied, “Yes of course, it is an Aboriginal college.” When asked how, he answered, “It may not be incorporated or written in the course but one would, again, hope that the teachers are localising and contextualising the subjects to be Culturally “sensitive”.⁵³ Even though Griffen hopes that at Eora, Culture is being incorporated in the delivery of subjects, and sensitively (that is, in a culturally appropriate way) by the teachers, there is no guarantee that what he hopes for is actually occurring. His comments do, however, raise a critical question. Can it be guaranteed that Culture and/or Indigenous performance perspectives can be delivered in a classroom context simply by way of employing Aboriginal teachers and or through training non-Indigenous teachers in these areas? The answer to this question, as I have suggested, is yes, as I now outline in the arguments that follow.

For NSW President of the NSW Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group (AECG), Cindy Berwick, teachers employed in identified positions at all levels of education should have a strong connection to community, as well as knowledge of Aboriginal Culture. Berwick suggests that this ensures that Aboriginal perspectives get delivered in a classroom context.⁵⁴ However, Dr Bob Morgan argues in “Aboriginality and Identity, perspectives, practices and policies” (2011), a report commissioned by the NSW AECG, that the requirement of demonstrating knowledge of community, and

⁵³ In interview with Darryl Griffen, 8 September 2009.

⁵⁴ Berwick made this statement at the steering committee meeting for the NSW Museums and Galleries ‘Beyond Keeping Places’ Summit, Sydney, 18 May 2011.

Culture is problematic due to a range of issues including those specific to Stolen Generations.⁵⁵ Aboriginal people who did not grow up in a community or know anything about their Culture, and who are employed in identified positions need to, according to Berwick and Morgan, reconnect with their community and to Culture. I would add that in this way they are contributing to the culture of the college. I also suggest that Aboriginal teachers employed at Aboriginal colleges and institutes are, however, still exposed to Aboriginality and Culture, even if it is not always in the accepted sense through informal contact with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers and staff. Under these conditions, a classroom or college community is formed where opportunities for Cultural exchange are possible. This was my own experience when working at an Aboriginal college.

In the beginning of this thesis, I presented an account of my journey to discovering my identity, and how I also came to know of the importance of Culture and heritage to Indigenous performance practices. This was an experience I attribute to being with, listening to, and watching other Aboriginal actors. On reflection, however, I did struggle with how to apply that knowledge and experience in a classroom environment. I found that it was not so much that I did not know about Culture, heritage and performance practices, only that I was not always sure how these could be taught. It was not until after many years as a teacher did I realise that what occurs in acting practice, can also apply in a classroom context.

I wondered then, how non-Indigenous teachers and trainers might also grapple with similar issues. What I discovered, through the course of this research, was that

⁵⁵ This phrase refers to the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by Federal and State policies (Aboriginal Protection Acts) in Australia between 1909 and 1969.

most either continue in the good struggle, by keeping themselves informed and connected to the local Aboriginal community, and with Indigenous theatre practitioners and workers, or they relegate these issues to the “too hard” basket hoping that they will be dealt with by the communities themselves. This will become evident as I continue with this review of the Identified programs. At the conclusion of this review I will comment on this issue further.

The Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA)

ACPA offers tertiary training in performance through certificate and diploma level courses that include subjects in music, dance, and acting. The foundation certificate courses concentrate heavily on dance and movement, but include acting, music and performance subjects. At diploma level, students can major in one discipline and each student is provided with a course structure that includes core subjects across disciplines, plus an individualised program specifically designed for his or her needs. As well as constructing individual programs, staff at ACPA, also facilitate the writing of course subjects, especially those that include aspects of Culture. The Culture subjects at ACPA are designed in consultation with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory group that consists of members of the local community, Aboriginal leaders in performance practice, and with Cultural elders. Relevant government departments review these particular subjects. ACPA former Associate Artistic Director Penny Mullen describes this process:

We write our own courses, and there are units that are used by TAFE and RTOs nationally, and we can pick from those units. Anything that doesn't meet our needs we write. If it is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit, only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people write and develop that unit. Administrators do not write it. Industry then meet and we go over the units again, and then we put together the program. Then it goes to Government to discuss the legalities of delivering these units.⁵⁶

The process and development of subjects delivered at ACPA described above is a model approach that is based on the principles of Indigenous ownership, leadership and respect. The inclusion of an appropriate Aboriginal voice, or a diversity of Aboriginal voices, encourages a real engagement with the Aboriginal arts and Culture both across an organisation and even in the classroom delivery of subjects that incorporate Indigenous perspectives and Culture. However, I argue, that for students and staff of the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs (and those at mainstream actor training programs) to have a meaningful engagement with Culture it would require that there be Aboriginal students and trainers present in some way. I talk more about this later.

The approach, described above, for developing Cultural programs at ACPA does have its challenges however, which are according to Mullen the Australian

⁵⁶ In interview with Penny Mullen, 2 April 2009, Brisbane, Queensland.

Quality Framework, which is heavily based on “competencies”, which does not always support the ACPA method. She comments:

The RTO approach to competencies doesn't work or translate to industry. I know from my own experience that if I were just competent I would be working out at the Betty Ballet School in Ipswich. You have to be a lot more than competent to work in the performing arts.⁵⁷

Mullen maintains that ACPA must offer more than just skills-based training. The inclusion of subjects on Culture in performance is, for Mullen, a more complete program for Indigenous students. Much like Eora, ACPA offers a broad range of performing arts subjects that include skills-based subjects like voice, movement, dance, singing, and acting. However, unlike Eora, ACPA delivers core units that focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance practice and perspectives, which for Mullen is integral to the overall success of ACPA graduates for the following reasons:

Some of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been disconnected from culture, and have been brought up without any cultural connection. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture must be preserved, and it must evolve. As we are producing the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performers we

⁵⁷ In interview with Penny Mullen, 2 April 2009, Brisbane, Queensland.

have an obligation to provide cultural units in their training. It is their strength of voice as an artist. Individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists have their own voice that needs to be heard.⁵⁸

Although ACPA has a strong sense of the place of Culture across all programs, it is not always clear how and when Culture is delivered, given the lack of Aboriginal full-time teaching staff. Mullen assures me, however, that regular visiting Indigenous elders and arts leaders complement the program with their experience and knowledge of Culture. Mullen explains the course program in the following way:

It is structured and non-structured. So in Certificate three and four there are core units that explore Indigenous performance practices, examine Indigenous perspectives, and create and tell stories. They are just some of the core units across the certificate levels. Indigenous teachers deliver these units.⁵⁹

And yet, as mentioned, the full-time trainers at ACPA are primarily non-Aboriginal, with the exception of Leah Purcell. Purcell, a Wakka Wakka woman from Queensland, held the position of Artistic Director at ACPA in 2009. However, Purcell was not part of the day to day management of the centre, nor did she teach full-time. Instead, Purcell contributed to the program at times throughout the year as a teacher

⁵⁸ In interview with Penny Mullen, 2 April 2009, Brisbane, Queensland.

⁵⁹ In interview with Penny Mullen, 2 April 2009, Brisbane, Queensland.

and as a director on various productions, which was mainly due to her professional acting, writing and producing commitments.

Mullen blames the AQF framework also for the lack of permanent Indigenous teaching staff at ACPA. She holds the belief that it is almost impossible to get Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainers with the documentation required to deliver training in an RTO: “Grooming the next generation of trainers is our job.” However, the AQF standards require that teachers and trainers employed by RTOs hold tertiary qualifications, both in their field of study, and a certificate four level qualification or above in workplace assessment. I have a Diploma of Dramatic Art, a Master in Adult Education and a Master of Creative Arts Research, but I am still required to hold a certificate four level qualification in workplace assessment in order to teach at the TAFE level. It is not the situation that there are no qualified Aboriginal people in the performing arts. Rather, I suggest, that it is more the case that most who complete their training in acting aspire to employment in their chosen field, rather than pursuing a teaching career.

If non-Indigenous teachers and staff make up most of the full-time positions at ACPA, how then do they see the place of Culture, or Indigenous performance practices in actor training? When asked if Indigenous students would benefit from knowing more about their Cultural and performance heritage, full-time ACPA dance instructor Nick Hills replied:

Yes I do. Again, we respond to the needs of the group. Some students have a strong connection to Culture and some do not have any. So

without shaming some students we work out how to balance those needs. There is sensitivity in that process. When non-Indigenous teachers start to teach here unless they are clued in and I know I went through this myself, they adopt the missionary position.⁶⁰

As Hills continued to describe how other non-Indigenous teachers struggle with the Cultural context of ACPA, a disturbing picture emerged. According to him, the “missionary position” is where some teachers are unable to see that many of the ACPA Indigenous students come from completely different social and educational experiences from the broader student population of students generally, and that many students have not completed mainstream courses and programs. At ACPA, according to Hills, non-Indigenous teachers will often experience shock and horror that students don’t know who Shakespeare is. To counter this perceived lack of Western theatre knowledge they then try to teach students Shakespeare plays. These teachers usually don’t last long, according to Hills. He believes that, “what those teachers should be asking is, what stories do the students know that are of equal value to the ones you are quoting?” Hills suggests, that Indigenous plays and Indigenous stories can have equal value in an Aboriginal context, to that of Shakespeare in some mainstream theatre programs.

For Indigenous students at ACPA, who may also have their own expectations about what acting practices should be delivered, much like those articulated by Law at the start of this thesis, the privileging of Western theatre knowledge is sometimes

⁶⁰ In interview with Nick Hills, 2 April 2009, Brisbane, Queensland.

uncomfortable. Law is an ACPA graduate, and he had this to say about his experiences with some of the non-Indigenous teachers employed during his time there.

At ACPA there were a lot of non-Indigenous teachers there. I found there was quite a bit of conflict because I didn't believe that the teachers had enough knowledge about Aboriginal people or protocols. There were a lot of communication breakdowns sometimes. There were no negatives to be honest, just misunderstandings.⁶¹

I felt Law wanted to say something more about the non-Indigenous teachers, but that he felt uneasy about taking it further as this might be seen as putting ACPA down. He did offer some specific advice however on how non-Indigenous teachers could find out more about working with Aboriginal students like sourcing information available in the public domain in documents like, Drama Australia's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guidelines for Drama/ Theatre Education* (2007), or the Australia Council's protocols for producing Indigenous Australian performing arts (2010). It would also be good practice for teachers and trainers employed by Aboriginal-identified actor training programs to read up on how to engage with the Cultural or performance context they will be entering.

If Law felt that some teachers had little knowledge of Aboriginal culture or performance practices, I had to ask other students the question, was there any

⁶¹ In interview with Sonny Dallas Law. 7 October 2009, Redfern, Sydney.

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Culture provided in the training at ACPA. When asked, the graduates I interviewed⁶² answered “yes”. When invited to describe how this was delivered ACPA graduate, Attel, replied:

We often had people come in for traditional dance. We had elders come in and tell stories, the history of Black theatre. There were specific units where we looked at Indigenous culture in theatre and outside of Western theatre.

For Attel, there was a sense that Culture was taught in two ways. It happened in contact with visiting Indigenous elders and lecturers informally through storytelling, and there was a heightened awareness, for Attel, of an Indigenous theatre context that came from this experience. The formal delivery of Indigenous theatre subjects added to these experiences. The key element for both Attel and Law is this two-fold approach, much like the two-way educational context outlined by Harris (1990) in the previous chapter.

In briefly comparing the actor training programs offered by ACPA and Eora, it can be said that ACAPA goes to great lengths to ensure that Cultural subjects are seen as core to their vision and programs. However, the day-to-day delivery of these subjects is problematic due to the absence of any full-time Aboriginal teaching staff. The Eora course, on the other hand, has no core subjects in Culture or in Indigenous performance practice, yet has a greater probability for a student engagement with these

⁶² Carmen Attell and Sonny Dallas Law.

concepts because the acting program is delivered by full-time and casual Aboriginal staff. Both programs provide opportunities for students to engage with Culture and Indigenous performance perspectives, but in very different ways. I will now turn my attention to the third Aboriginal identified actor training program, the WAAPA Aboriginal Theatre course.

The WAAPA Aboriginal Theatre Course

The Aboriginal Theatre course at WAAPA presents itself as Aboriginal in name, and includes Cultural subjects as core in its course outline. However, on closer inspection, the program seems more like a mainstream course, except that students are primarily Aboriginal.

The WAAPA Aboriginal theatre course documents outline two core components of the acting program, which are: “to develop knowledge of local and traditional skills for performance”; and “to memorise and perform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works with historical and conceptual meaning”.⁶³ The Aboriginal Culture and performance practice subjects complement a primarily skills-based acting program that also includes subjects in movement, voice, singing, acting and improvisation.

The way in which the Aboriginal Cultural subjects are placed in the WAAPA course outline is not dissimilar to the way they present in the ACPA course documents. However, when I first broached the question of how Culture and Aboriginal performance practice is delivered in the Aboriginal theatre program,

⁶³ WAAPA The Aboriginal Theatre homepage:
www.waapa.ecu.edu.au/courses_and_admissions/our_courses/disciplines/aboriginal_theatre

WAAPA course coordinator Rick Brayford's response was simply, "We don't teach culture". The course documents clearly articulate, however, that they do. So, I asked Brayford why he thought that Culture was not part of the Aboriginal Theatre program. He responded:

Once they graduate, how they use culture that they may want to package for themselves in performance, which is none of our business, that is to do with them and their mob. So this is what we do. The cultural pieces, where we decide to teach culture, what we usually do is we run one slot a year that has a devised work, and this is where they bring any of their culture with them. Through that slot most of the research they have to do is with their mob, elders and people that they may have lost contact with. So they go out and research whatever theme we've been working on depending on the drama. To get "Gaama", non-secret stories that is public knowledge so that we know they can be safely told, and that we have the blessing of the mob.⁶⁴

Brayford's understanding of how he and others engage with Culture is three fold. In the first instance he does not see Culture as the business of the acting program. Instead, he sees Culture as the responsibility of the local communities that students come from. However, if and when Culture is explored, students are given the

⁶⁴ In interview with Rick Brayford, 13 October 2008, Perth, Western Australia.

opportunity to research their own Culture, specifically their own language groups and/or elders or family. However, not all Aboriginal students have contact with their language groups. I understand that Culture is the business of communities; however, this implies that all Indigenous students engage with their communities. Western Australia is the state furthest from the eastern state sites of initial colonial contact like NSW, and even though the removal of Aboriginal children from communities, and other forms of Cultural and community disruption, occurred across all states since colonisation, many Aboriginal communities in Western Australia still retain a strong connection to and engagement with, their Cultural heritage, language, practices, and customs. ACPA, by contrast, does not make the assumption that students have these connections. Its vision is clearly focused on “reconnecting” students to Culture.

It was obvious from his responses to the interview question on the place of Culture in actor-training that Brayford feels uncomfortable with “teaching” Culture. So, I asked him why have an Aboriginal course if it does not engage with Culture? To which Brayford replied, “It’s a name.” Again, I pressed further on what he meant by this. He replied:

With the cultural thing, I discovered very early in the piece that you just cannot do both. I am telling you, I tried. I try to do both. Even with a three-year course. Look, you are battling to train an actor in three years with 40, 50 hours a week. How the hell can you do both?⁶⁵

⁶⁵ In interview with Rick Brayford, 13 October 2008, Perth, Western Australia.

From my time with Brayford at WAAPA I began to understand that his ability to deliver Culture as a subject was affected not necessarily by his lack of engagement with Aboriginal communities, as Brayford has a long history of working with Aboriginal people. Even though Brayford is a non-Indigenous man, he has trained Aboriginal people in acting and performance since the early 1990s, firstly as an English and media teacher at a local high school in Port Hedland, and in his appointment in 1995 as Coordinator of a music theatre program (for Aboriginal students) out of the Notre Dame University in Broome. The university appointed him due to his knowledge and experience with working with the Aboriginal communities in the area in and around the Pilbara region. The lack of engagement with Culture at WAAPA is, I suggest, to do more with the way that the program is (under) resourced and (under) staffed than Brayford's inability to provide any Cultural elements or performance perspectives in the delivery course.

A program like the Aboriginal theatre course at WAAPA needs specific resources to deliver what the course was originally designed to do, that is to provide Aboriginal students with opportunities to engage with Culture, as well as knowledge of Aboriginal performing arts history and practices. Delivering core subjects in Culture becomes problematic not because of the debate as to whose responsibility it is to teach Culture, but by a lack of support for more contact with Aboriginal teachers and community members. Brayford does employ guest Aboriginal lecturers and arts practitioners occasionally, however, I would argue that the casual hiring of Aboriginal staff at WAAPA does not provide an ongoing and continuous engagement with Culture

as part of the delivery of the actor training program, or of Aboriginal performing arts and practices, nor does it highlight the potential career pathways available for students.

Much like Enoch, Brayford also acknowledges that Culture has a place in the making of Aboriginal plays. However, the WAAPA Aboriginal Theatre program focuses instead on the Western and European canons and styles of acting for reasons that Brayford outlines below:

It is in every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander play. However, let's train you for an industry, not just something that is closed like Culture. In that way we are asking the industry what about those black Hamlets? What about the first Ophelia? What about the first black King Lear?⁶⁶

Mainstream theatre and acting approaches have come to dominate the Aboriginal Theatre course at WAAPA even though the course documents clearly frame the program and its history as one set up by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people. What impact (if any) does this approach have on Indigenous student perceptions or expectations of Culture and Aboriginal theatre practice in relation to their own training or developing practice? To find out, I asked WAAPA Aboriginal theatre graduate Shakara Walley, a descendant of the Djaru people from the Kimberly region, whether any Culture or Aboriginal performance practice subjects were delivered in the acting program, she replied:

⁶⁶ In interview with Rick Brayford, 13 October 2008, Perth, Western Australia.

Pardon? You mean about learning about Aboriginal Culture in the course? Well we did Indigenous plays by Jack Davis, so we did a lot of research on the era and historical research. With Simon Stewart, our dance teacher, he incorporated a lot of animal movements with the identities, so like the Indigenous animal dances. I remember sitting down for about a week and we discussed our Aboriginality kind of thing. We were talking about everything from spirituality to now to back in the olden days. They set a whole week aside where we just talked about our different stuff so from that we made up a spiritual dance, a cultural dance.⁶⁷

Walley did say that there were times during her training when Culture was engaged with as part of the acting program. For her, as described here, this took place when examining contemporary Aboriginal plays, and in dance practice. More importantly, Walley made a point of naming the Aboriginal teacher delivering the dance module, and given that there was an exploration of animal movements, this naming somewhat implies that the delivery of these skills was done through an Aboriginal perspective and that perhaps when engaged with this teacher some Cultural experiences were exchanged.

Another Aboriginal Theatre graduate, Maitland Schnaars, who identifies as a Noongar man, replied to the same question in a similar way:

⁶⁷ In interview with Shakara Walley, 9 October 2008, Perth, Western Australia.

Many of the plays we looked at were Indigenous plays. When I was doing it, there was this elder who was supposed to come down from a community and teach us some song lines but something happened in the community and he couldn't come down. We got to know people in the industry like Yirra Yaakin and Davis Milroy. Rick keeps you in the loop.⁶⁸

So, for Schnaars, like Walley, the opportunities to engage with Culture also occur when Aboriginal guest lecturers like director and writer, David Milroy, or Aboriginal elders, visit the program. Why then does Brayford come across as though he does not want to discuss the place of Culture in the program, when from student responses it is evident that they are exposed to it through teachers, subject delivery, and in the exploration of performance practice?

In discussing the Aboriginal theatre program with current WAAPA Director Julie Warne, which revealed much about the views of WAAPA management of the program, I began to realise that there was a perception at WAAPA that Western theatre practices are central to the success of Aboriginal graduates. Warne explained why this approach works for Aboriginal students:

From my discussions with a lot of the students over the years, a lot come here with a very strong sense of their own Culture. And they

⁶⁸ In interview with Maitland Schnaars, 15 October 2008, Perth, Western Australia..

are very proud of it, of course, but they want skills in the white man's area. They don't want to come out of this course being even more skilled in their own cultural practice. It is not why they have actually come here. They see it as an entry point into white man's territory in the theatrical sense. It is not that they lose their own identity but the serious ones want to go on and do more than just the Aboriginal theatre course, they want to get into acting whether that is here or somewhere else.⁶⁹

The current rationale behind the Aboriginal theatre course, according to Warne is that it is a program based on industry demand for well-trained Aboriginal actors. Warne assures me that this (to be skilled in the white man's area) is what students also want. However, it is interesting to note that the course information documents at the time of this research stated the following:

The Aboriginal Theatre course is designed to assist students who want to enter theatre from a cultural perspective and who have been hampered by obstacles including a lack of tuition at an appropriate level.

From this statement an Aboriginal person might interpret the “cultural perspective” as being Aboriginal, and that the course would provide theatre training

⁶⁹ In interview with Julie Warne, Director of WAAPA, 14 October 2008, Perth, Western Australia.

from an Aboriginal perspective. This is not, according to Warne, the case.

I am not convinced that Indigenous students only enrol in the WAAPA Aboriginal theatre course to “see it as an entry point into white man’s territory in the theatrical sense”, as Warne states. Instead, graduates like Schnaars and Walley see the acting program as a place to primarily learn acting skills and then apply these in practice when working with other Aboriginal people, like guest theatre practitioners from the Aboriginal theatre sector. Comments from management, however, provide a very different perspective on how the course is delivered, which is that in order to be successful Indigenous students need to learn Western theatre practices. The course outline now reads:

The Certificate IV in Aboriginal Theatre prepares the talented student for the demands of work in theatre, film and television. Some graduates go on to win places in higher-level acting and dance training programs at WAAPA, NIDA, NAISDA and VCA. Many graduates of the Aboriginal Theatre course have established solid careers as professional performers.⁷⁰

The emphasis here is more on professional practice (which underpins a Western training approach) and is less about Cultural perspectives. I do not argue here against professional practice, only that it is possible to be both professional and competent in one’s own Cultural practices. In 2005 I co-wrote an article, “The Challenges of

⁷⁰URL: http://www.waapa.ecu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/23925/WAAPA-Aboriginal-Theatre.pdf

Benevolence: the role of the Indigenous actors”, where I argue that “whiteness” dominates Australian stages. Further, that whiteness constitutes what an actor is within a traditional Western theatre context, and that this acts as a barrier with which Indigenous actors must continually engage (2005, p. 99). After writing this article, I began to consider that if British and American approaches to acting dominate mainstream Australian stages, then it could be said that they also dominate our drama schools (I discussed this in Chapter 3). The question that emerged from this article for me was: how do Indigenous acting students maintain a sense of their own identity as non-white in mainstream actor-training institutes? Further, how do Indigenous students claim space within these essentially white contexts? If the administration of mainstream programs (and Aboriginal programs run at mainstream institutes) maintain Western theatre as the cultural centre of performance practice in Australia, then Indigenous students will at some point, either in their training or when working in the industry, come up against this perception.

For Indigenous theatre practitioners, and also for some student actors, the relevance of Indigenous Culture, identity and performance practices will be continually contested. How then do institutes support (or not) students who, like their Indigenous peers, see Culture as central to their practice? These are questions I examine in more detail in the section that follows on mainstream actor training programs. Now, however I want to continue by examining the location of Culture in mainstream actor-training programs, and where, when and how opportunities might (or might not) arise for Indigenous students to engage with Culture in these training contexts.

Mainstream actor-training programs

National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA)

Across the three compulsory theory subjects offered in the acting course curriculum at NIDA, the words Aboriginal and Culture appear once. Aboriginal Culture, history and heritage are discussed within a non-compulsory general studies subject. It is one of a group of five general studies topics including: the Australian Constitution; Islam and Christianity; Cognitive Science; Drugs and Alcohol; Sexuality; and National Identity. NIDA often engages Aboriginal actors like Wayne Blair or people from local community organisations to discuss subjects like identity and Culture, and when engaging an Aboriginal theatre-maker or actor there is also the opportunity for discussions on practice. Mostly, however, what is discussed is kept within the general studies paradigm.

Other compulsory subjects like The History of Theatre, which focuses on the “Classics”, are offered in the first year. This is a compulsory three-hour weekly subject. The History of Theatre (2), also a three-hour weekly compulsory topic, covers seven fields of “modern” theatre which include: 19th Century Australian; Modern Australian; European Realism; Expressionism; Irish European Modern; Modern America; Modern “World” theatre (Asia); and Modern, Post-modern performance theory and practice. A recommended reading list for this subject contains one reference to a play written by an Aboriginal playwright—Jack Davis’s *No Sugar* (1986). There are three plays written by non-Indigenous playwrights that contain Indigenous themes or content: *Holy Day* (2004) by Andrew Bovell, *Inheritance* (2003) by Hannie Rayson, and the *Man from Mukinupin* (1979) by Dorothy Hewitt. There are also nine

recommended readings of which only one critically engages with Indigenous performance practice, Katharine Brisbane's *Entertaining Australia* (1993). It is clear from these suggested texts and plays that there is no significant exploration of Indigenous performance practice in the core theory subjects on offer at NIDA.

When asked about Aboriginal Culture and performance perspectives in actor training, the Indigenous NIDA graduates offered differing answers. Ben Graetz,⁷¹ said, "No, I wasn't there to study Indigenous skills, but I would have liked to know who was out there and what they were doing",⁷² Graetz fully embraced his mainstream cultural experience while at NIDA, and for him an engagement with Culture was not central to this experience. However, he still articulates a need for some connection to, or knowledge of, the Aboriginal theatre sector that he would later graduate into.

Leon Burchill⁷³, on the other hand, responded instead with a description of his own connection to Culture:

Of course our Culture is such a beautiful Culture, such a strong Culture, a lot of black fellas say we are natural performers, because it's been passed down from generation to generation. Having a solid heritage shows the world what we can do. Always, it is there for me, and also the environment because that's who I am. As much as I

⁷¹ Ben's great-grandmother is from Badu Island in the Torres Strait Islands, and his grandfather comes from the Mulluck Mulluck people of the Daly River, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.

⁷² In interview with Ben Graetz, 23 July 2008, Sydney.

⁷³ Leon identifies as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander man from Queensland.

try to avoid it a lot of times you just can't it is part of you. You just have to accept that it is how I get things done.⁷⁴

Although Leon does not answer the question, he does frame performance practice as Culture. Further, for him Culture and performance are something inherent to being Aboriginal. Leon is “solid” in his Culture, therefore it might also be said that he is strong in his (Indigenous) performance practice because of this connection. Now, both Graetz and Burchill arrived at NIDA having graduated from Aboriginal-identified courses, Graetz from the Aboriginal theatre course in Western Australia (when it was run by Michael Leslie), and Leon from ACPA. Both came to NIDA strong in experience and knowledge of Culture. Both still felt that it would be beneficial if there were opportunities at NIDA to engage with knowledge of Aboriginal Cultural heritage and theatre practices, but more importantly the Indigenous theatre sector in Australia. When asked if Culture and Aboriginal performance perspectives and practices should have been delivered at NIDA, Burchill replied, “Definitely. Not only because I am an Indigenous person, it teaches other people about other cultures about the first Australians, and that is very important.” For him, delivering these subjects in a mainstream course is not necessarily about his engagement with them, but rather for other students to also have that opportunity to experience them.

I wondered if teachers and staff at NIDA might also take the view that an engagement with Cultural heritage and Indigenous performance practice would benefit

⁷⁴ In interview with Leon Burchill, 11 November 2008, Sydney, NSW.

both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Then acting teacher, Kevin Jackson had this to say in response:

Absolutely. It is imperative that there be that exchange. One student who was “full blood” who was strongly culturally connected in his community used to tell us stories of how he lived in those communities. I thought it was essential that all students and staff should know what he was navigating by his engagement with his culture and in being here with us. We try to treat every one the same, so I would ask him why he wasn’t jumping the hurdles that the other students were required to jump. If you don’t know his circumstances then you can’t make allowances for him. Once you know the cultural differences, everyone then understands where and why he does what he does. Sometimes the non-Indigenous actors don’t understand why the Indigenous actors come to the work from a different place. It is out of ignorance that we don’t understand difference. I am learning from my students on cultural protocols so the students are learning from Indigenous students being in the class. All sections of NIDA learn from Indigenous students when we are putting on a show. We didn’t know how complex Cultural responsibilities were involved.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ In interview with Kevin Jackson, 30 July 2008, Sydney, NSW.

Jackson sees that the sharing of Cultural experiences as important to the development of both Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. He also highlights that connections and experiences to Culture take place when Indigenous students are present in the mainstream classroom context. And yet when asked if there was any Culture or Indigenous performance practice delivered as part of the acting program he replied:

No, the structure of the program stays the same as it does for every culture. However, we encourage Indigenous students to bring their Culture into the work. In the first year, we like to get that cross-cultural reference and for people to get to know each other. We encourage in first term storytelling. However, one student felt she couldn't show us a dance because it belonged to a family member. One student the year before was more open to showing what he knew.⁷⁶

At NIDA Indigenous students are encouraged to explore identity and Culture through devising a performance in the first year, which implies that NIDA is a place open to sharing these elements of students' lives. However, the overall structure of the course does not accommodate the inclusion of cultural perspectives. According to Jackson, some Indigenous students also felt that perhaps NIDA wasn't the place to perform their identity and Culture, having pre-existing priorities/obligations to their

⁷⁶ In interview with Kevin Jackson, 30 July 2008, Sydney, NSW.

communities, families and Culture that cannot be performed in a mainstream context. Perhaps Culture is something not so easily negotiated in mainstream contexts. The Cultural exchanges that do take place are encouraged; however, they are tightly monitored and controlled.

NIDA Director, Lyn Williams also agrees that contact with Indigenous performance perspectives at NIDA would be beneficial not only in the training context, but also for all students:

There are assumptions made that Australian actors would know something about Indigenous performance practice. I think there is a space for it. We teach Butoh and Stanislavski, why not the total Australian experience?⁷⁷

NIDA students do engage with other forms of cultural practice, as the curriculum shows, and as Williams explains. However, for some reason in Australia, knowledge of Indigenous Cultural heritage and performance practice is not considered as relevant to an Australian actor's practice. Yet, as Williams points out, there will be some expectations from within the acting profession that NIDA graduates know something about working in Aboriginal theatre contexts. To this end Williams shows a desire to include them in the future:

⁷⁷ In interview with Lynnette Williams, NIDA CEO, 3 March 2009, Sydney, NSW.

NIDA is going through a change and we are starting to reflect the Australia of today. We are not there yet. We need Aboriginal people to share with us the knowledge they have and create the space for that. Maybe the flexibility for electives that address the changing needs of performance for actors. A foundation course could provide the opportunities for more Indigenous students to engage with acting skills and knowledge, or by engaging the postgraduate students with local Indigenous communities and projects.⁷⁸

For Williams, change implies that NIDA will need to modify its current approach, as it does not include knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance practices or Cultural heritage in a performance context. NIDA sometimes engages elders from the local Aboriginal community and Indigenous theatre practitioners to deliver elective subjects in the general studies area. However, there still needs to be consideration as to how to provide these exchanges between students and guest lecturers strategically and pedagogically especially in a performative context. In other words, it will take more than just a lot of goodwill from students, teachers and staff to make these opportunities relevant to practice.

Victorian College of the Arts (VCA)

What follows is a critique of the VCA acting program on offer at the time of this research. A new program, Bachelor of Fine Arts (theatre practice) will run from 2013.

⁷⁸ In interview with Lynnette Williams, NIDA CEO, 3 March 2009, Sydney, NSW.

After outlining the current course, I will review the new course information, as this is relevant to this research. It highlights changes in thinking and approaches to actor-training at VCA.

The acting course offered at VCA was a three-year Bachelor of Dramatic Art. The course provided intensive skills training, performance making projects, studio productions and a wide variety of performance situations. According to the course outline, the acting course provided a critical engagement with performance practice in three subject areas: *Critical Studies*; *The Artist in the World Part 1 and 2*; *The World in the Artist 2A and 2B*. It is in the description and outline of these subjects that the words “culture” and “cultural” appear, in the Generic Skills segment, right at the beginning of the course overview. Here I found the following statement: “At the completion of this course students should be able to: critically and creatively engage with topics of cultural significance across communities”. This was followed by: “Understanding their relationship with and responsibility to their cultural environment and society”. The key objective of *The Artist in the World*, offered in the first year was to “identify key issues in contemporary cultural practice”. A *Critical Studies* subject, designed to provide students with the opportunity to discuss a range of ideas and issues, related to culture in general, and theatre in particular in an analytical and enquiring manner. In the second year, students were required to enrol in university-type seminars under the subject area, There are nine objectives of this unit, *The World in the Artist*, that related to research and analytical skills. The ninth objective states that on completion of this module students should be able to “demonstrate familiarity with recent cultural debates and new cultural practices”.

I was excited when I found these subjects as I thought out of all the mainstream actor-training programs this is where opportunities would arise to discuss Cultural heritage in performance practice, and Indigenous perspectives in performance. However, when asked if there were any Aboriginal performance perspectives incorporated into the delivery of the acting program at VCA, School of Drama Dean Richard Murphett responded with a simple, “No”. However, he, like Williams from NIDA did believe that Indigenous students would benefit from knowing more about their Cultural and performance heritage. How then, I thought, do Indigenous students critically and creatively engage with topics of cultural significance, or understand their relationship with and responsibility to their cultural environment and society? Also, when might they (Indigenous students) have the chance to discuss their familiarity with their Cultural practices?

According to Murphett, there has been a lot of discussion on how the school might be able to include the needs of the Indigenous student, and the feeling I got from him was that again, this comment was made in good faith. However, when asked if he believed that the course provided the necessary training for Indigenous actors to find work in the industry he replied,

I don't know what that training is as the industry deals with Indigenous actors quite weirdly anyway. There have been attempts over the years to provide specific training to the needs of Indigenous actors. However, they all come here with the same stars in their eyes as everyone else. They might have a different cultural background,

and they bring a different experiential thing to it. They usually want to work in theatre, film and television. Then they find the hard knot. That is a long way of saying that in the next few years there needs to be a shift in training to deal with both the talent and the needs of Indigenous actors.⁷⁹

Like Jackson and Williams from NIDA, Murphett shows interest in developing or including Indigenous performance practices into the program, but somehow it always falls into the “too hard basket”. This statement does, however, touch on the professional relevance of the current actor-training program for Indigenous students in their subsequent careers. This “hard knot” that Murphett refers to is, I suggest, what many Indigenous actors will encounter once graduating, and that is the realities of being an Indigenous actor in Australia. There will be expectations from the theatre sector and from within the profession for Indigenous students to be able to critically engage with their practice, understand the relationship and responsibilities of that practice to their communities, and demonstrate a familiarity with new debates on Indigenous theatre practices, whilst also demonstrating a “professional” practice.

There have not been many Indigenous acting graduates from VCA. Kylie Belling, a Yorta Yorta/Bangarang/Wiradjuri woman born and raised in Melbourne, was the first to graduate from the Victorian College of the Arts School of Drama in 1985. Belling was a co-founder of Ilbjerri⁸⁰ in 1990, in 2000 as Artistic Director. However, she no longer works fulltime in theatre. Last time I had contact with Kylie

⁷⁹ In interview with Richard Murphett, Acting Head of the Victorian College of Arts, 10 July 2008.

⁸⁰ Ilbjerri is an Aboriginal theatre company in Melbourne.

she was working at the Koori Heritage Trust, an Aboriginal organisation in Melbourne. As mentioned, I graduated from the VCA acting program in 1990. The majority of Indigenous students that now come through VCA graduate from Willin.⁸¹ This is not to say that Indigenous students do not enrol or graduate from the acting course, only that they make up a small part of the overall Indigenous student population. Two Indigenous graduates I interviewed as part of this research, Jadah Plieter (nee Milroy), who is a descendant of the Palyku people from the Pilbara Region in Western Australia, and Yorta Yorta woman Andrea James, are graduates of the VCA theatre program.

Plieter moved to Melbourne from Perth to study acting at VCA. Like NIDA graduate Graetz, Plieter also began her training at the Aboriginal Music Theatre course run by Michael Leslie. After graduating from the Leslie program Plieter wanted to enrol in the VCA theatre-making program, which at that time had been suspended, awaiting degree level clearance. VCA staff encouraged Plieter to enrol in the acting course instead for one year. Unfortunately, the theatre-making course was reintroduced at a postgraduate level in the following year, and because the Aboriginal theatre course run by Michael Leslie, was not a recognised qualification (at that time), she could not enrol in the higher degree program. However, Plieter did enrol in the VCA undergraduate acting program in 1996.

In discussing the VCA acting course with Plieter, I was able to get an idea of the types of issues and challenges she experienced having come from a different

⁸¹ The Willin Centre, is an Indigenous Cultural centre situated on the VCA campus. The centre was established in 2002 funded primarily from philanthropic money. Willin means 'fire' in Woi Wurrung local language of the traditional owners from the Melbourne area.

cultural context. When asked what the words actor-training meant, she replied with the following:

When I hear those words I think of a very English tradition of becoming a thespian. It doesn't really resonate with me those words. Because my experience of the actor-training institution seem to be imbued with all these other meanings and cultural terms of reference, they are very foreign to me.⁸²

For Plieter, then, actor-training in a mainstream context came to mean training in English theatre traditions. When asked to compare this experience to the course in Perth, she commented:

I wish VCA were that course really. The first time I did it, it was six months and the second year I did it, and it was a full year. We did a mixture of voice, dance, improvisation and acting, all of those foundational skills. But, they always had an Aboriginal focus. You would be encouraged to read and choose texts from Aboriginal plays. But it was an Aboriginal course. Then we would all work together to develop our own material for performance. All of our

⁸² Phone interview with Jadah Plieter, 31 October 2008.

performances were original material. I think that is why I am very interested in that.⁸³

Plieter's vision of her own theatre and performance practice, developed at the Aboriginal theatre program in Perth, did not find traction while she was enrolled in the VCA acting program. The school found it difficult to integrate her version within the highly structured and established actor-training program. Plieter was, however, eventually offered the opportunity to create her own work, which was the result of a sustained campaign on her part. The result of this is, *The Promise*, a musical drama written by Plieter while at VCA.⁸⁴ What is clear from Plieter's experience is that mainstream acting colleges show a willingness to engage with Indigenous students, yet find it problematic to address their needs, especially those that centre on a continued engagement with Culture, community and an exploration of their own theatre practice. In concluding the interview with Plieter, I asked if there was anything she would change about her experience at VCA, to which she replied:

Have Aboriginal content, and at the very least discuss issues of protocols. People still think that Aboriginal stuff only happens in remote areas of Australia. They don't know that they are here or next door.⁸⁵

⁸³ Phone interview with Jadah Plieter, 31 October 2008.

⁸⁴ *The Promise* can be found at the Australian Script Centre archive <http://www.ozscript.org>

⁸⁵ Phone interview with Jadah Plieter (Milroy), 31 October 2008.

Like many of Indigenous graduates interviewed for this research, Plieter believes that the non-Indigenous students at VCA would also benefit from knowledge of Cultural practices, especially protocols for working with Cultural material in performance. Further, she also feels that both students and the College need to engage more with the local community. This sentiment resonates with VCA graduate, Andrea James who remarks:

There are a lot of non-Indigenous performers working with Indigenous people in the industry, and I think that they should get a good grounding of protocols before they go out and work with individuals and communities.⁸⁶

James came to VCA with a Bachelor in Arts Drama from Latrobe University, and because of this was eligible to enrol in the post-graduate animating course. For James, exploring her own heritage and putting these experiences on stage, were her reasons for applying to VCA. She explains, “I wanted to work with other blackfellas. I think secretly everyone wants to be a star but I was interested in exploring my own stories”. However, working with Aboriginal people, communities, and Cultural material for James requires specific knowledge of protocols for working in these contexts.

Although many young hopefuls do come to VCA with “stars in their eyes”, as Murphett asserts, this may not be the case for all Indigenous acting students. Andrea

⁸⁶ Phone interview with Andrea James, 7 August 2008.

came with a vision of her own, to learn new ways of telling the stories of her people, much like what Law articulates in the opening quote of this thesis. These stories may not always be best told in the Western theatre framework. They are Indigenous stories that are specific to place and, I suggest, may need to be told in a different space. Therefore, some Indigenous students may come to these programs with different approaches, with very clear visions, and may not simply be dazzled by the spotlight of potential stardom.

During her time at VCA James campaigned strongly for the recognition and inclusion of Cultural heritage across college programs, as well as petitioning for more support for Indigenous students. For her, the rationale behind this push followed from a critical incident that occurred while she was studying. As she explains:

At one time there were a whole bunch of Maori people came over for an exchange and the whole school embraced them, sang their songs, and danced. This made me sad that we couldn't do that sort of thing in our own school. They taught all the boys the Hakka, but hadn't acknowledged the land they were on. They never acknowledged that they were stomping on the Kulim nation⁸⁷ and I found that offensive. I wrote a letter to the Director of the college and after that we got some Indigenous theatre makers in and tried to address that. That was when they created the Indigenous liaison position, and we got to assist Indigenous students coming to the college, and teach staff

⁸⁷ "Kulim" is the name of the original inhabitants of the Melbourne area.

about Indigenous protocols. Andrea Hull who was the College Director at the time worked with Michelle Evans to open the Wilin Centre.⁸⁸

The work of the Indigenous student liaison position (created in 1996) led to VCA receiving the Victorian Anti-Discrimination award in 2001 for its work with Indigenous students. This caught the attention of a very wealthy foundation. With no strings attached, the foundation offered a six-figure sum to VCA to establish the Wilin Centre, an Indigenous Cultural unit situated on the VCA campus. The centre has four major strategies: cultural awareness; student support; student recruitment and access; and community development and relationship building. The centre continues today on the site of the St Kilda Road Southbank campus, offering support to Aboriginal students at VCA, and now offers graduate programs in Indigenous Arts Management.

What the Wilin model shows is that with a little initiative and commitment, and of course money, it is possible to create an Indigenous space within an established system. It is worth noting, however, that Victoria does not have its own Aboriginal-identified actor-training program. So, the work of Wilin becomes even more significant for that state for this reason.

Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA)

At WAAPA, potential acting students can choose from a number of theatre training programs. These include the Advanced Diploma of Performing Arts (Acting) and the

⁸⁸ Phone interview with Andrea James, 7 August 2008.

Bachelor of Arts (Performing Arts). There is also a music theatre course and various courses in theatre production.

The Advanced Diploma is a three-year full-time course that, according to the website, “prepares actors for professional work in theatre, film and television”. It is essentially a practical program developing skills in acting, voice, movement and text, which are then applied to stage productions. The practical training is grounded by the study of text analysis, theatre history, contemporary theatre practice and professional preparation. The website contains the following information on the acting course: “For over 25 years the Acting course has been developed and refined to provide graduates with the skills and experience required to engage in professional theatre practice,” Further:

The acting program trains students as a theatre ensemble. The ensemble develops performance skills in acting, voice, and movement by exploring a range of works and performance styles, as well as through improvisation and devising original works.⁸⁹

The Bachelor program, on the other hand is an eighteen-month course conversion program for Diploma level graduates who want to access the profession from another perspective. This program focuses more on a critical engagement with student practice.

I know of only two Indigenous graduates of the mainstream acting program at WAAPA—Gary Cooper, and Fred Copperwaite. I have worked with both at different

⁸⁹ URL: <http://www.waapa.ecu.edu.au/courses-and-admissions/our-courses/disciplines/acting>

times in my own career.⁹⁰ I haven't seen Gary for a long time since we worked together on *Shark Island Stories* in Sydney in 1993. Copperwaite graduated from the WAAPA acting program in 1987. He did not identify as an Aboriginal person while at college, however, as he thought he was "Black Irish" like his father. It was not until he delved further into his mother's background that he discovered his Aboriginality, something Copperwaite now embraces in his work as a teacher and director of theatre. At the time when both Copperwaite and Cooper were at WAAPA, there was no Aboriginal Theatre course on offer. Copperwaite was later informed that he was the first Aboriginal actor to come out of the academy. Copperwaite's response was, "I don't feel comfortable with that because in my opinion, Gary Cooper was the first, and that was in 1989."⁹¹

When asked if Indigenous performance perspective were included in the mainstream actor-training program at WAAPA, Copperwaite replied, "No, there were no acting methodologies articulated at all". To be fair, Copperwaite did graduate in 1990. Over the last 20 years, the course may have shifted in its articulation of the course program. What WAAPA is very clear on is its ensemble approach to acting. It also outlines how it delivers training, through basic skills like voice, movement and singing etc. However, when it comes to articulating a methodology, there is still no information available on the website, and neither are graduates able to explain one. The pedagogical processes and approaches to acting delivered at WAAPA remain, like

⁹⁰ While in Perth I also met Shareena Clamphorn , a graduate of the Aboriginal Theatre program currently in the second year of the mainstream acting course. Shareena was getting ready to perform in the role of Tituba from Arthur Miller's, *The Crucible*, when I met her. I did not interview her, as she was still enrolled in the acting program, and I only interviewed graduates for this research.

⁹¹ In interview with Fred Copperwaite, 19 July 2008, Sydney.

those at NIDA, to all intents and purposes, invisible.

From an examination of website course documents it was difficult to find any further information on the WAAPA course, apart from a little more detail on what I have already outlined. My visit to WAAPA, however, was taken up mainly with the Aboriginal Theatre Course, and so I do not do the acting program at WAAPA justice here. However, the program on offer at WAAPA is consistent with the approaches of the other mainstream actor-training courses reviewed here, as I will now outline in the closing summary of this chapter.

Summary

Comparatively, it is the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs that can offer the greatest opportunities for Indigenous students to engage with Culture during their training to be an actor. As mentioned, these opportunities mostly happen informally, but also sometimes formally. Students are provided with some understanding of Indigenous performance practices, and sector knowledge. Graduates in interview, mostly articulated that they experienced a feeling of confidence and belief in themselves that came from this engagement with Culture, and from knowing about Indigenous theatre history and the sector in their formative training experiences.

Culture and performance perspectives in mainstream actor-training programs, on the other hand, occupy an almost non-existent part of the overall program delivery. All actor-training programs did, however, show some willingness to include Indigenous perspectives in the delivery of training programs, but articulated that the

inflexibility of the broader education framework was what prevented any modifications to current course outlines and delivery.

For Indigenous students of mainstream programs it is the “performance making” subjects that provide them with opportunities for the exploration of Cultural heritage or Indigenous performance practices. In this performance space, Indigenous students may decide to engage with their Cultural heritage, while at other times they do not. A Cultural engagement is encouraged, or not actively discouraged, but is left to chance. Knowledge of Cultural heritage or Indigenous performance practice is not a core part of the mainstream actor-training programs.

It seems that Indigenous students do not have a lot of opportunities to engage with Culture or Indigenous performance perspectives while enrolled in a mainstream actor-training program. There is also little possibility that they will gain any further knowledge of Indigenous theatre history beyond what they have already learnt from their time at an Aboriginal Theatre program. And although this experience is not the experience that some Indigenous students go to a mainstream course to have, they still articulate a need to learn more about these aspects of their practice. Many Indigenous graduates will learn about these only after graduating from a mainstream program, as with my own experience. However, this learning may be difficult due to the shame of not having had much experience of Cultural heritage, or not having gained any further knowledge of Indigenous performance practices during their time at a mainstream actor-training program.

Knowledge of Australia’s diverse cultural environment and society is, I argue, the responsibility of both institutes and community. Each sector has a part to play in its

delivery, and in providing opportunities for all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to engage with and have knowledge of Australia's unique Cultural heritage. For Indigenous students, however, this opportunity is even more critical, not only to their identity, but to developing their own acting and theatre making practice.

For many Indigenous students who choose to follow a path to become an actor or to make theatre, that journey usually begins with Community, and in some cases, although not all, with some knowledge of Culture. In the chapter that follows, I will map out the journey from community to the institute. I will begin by exploring why Indigenous graduates choose to study acting, when they do, and why at a formal training program. More importantly, I will examine the very personal journey that some Indigenous acting hopefuls undertake to fulfil their dreams of becoming an actor.

CHAPTER 6

THE INDIGENOUS STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF ACTOR-TRAINING IN AUSTRALIA

I knew Leon was having trouble and we had him here [at Clarke's residence] quite a bit, we have a boat up in the Hawkesbury and I took him up there one day and we were all swimming and mucking around and I looked up and I said look, there are a couple of sea Eagles. He said that is my totem and I feel a lot better now about NIDA. It was important to him.⁹²

There are many reasons why people decide to begin a career in acting. For many, it is the lure of the stage; for some, it is the brightness of fame, and for others, like me, it is to follow in family footsteps. Drama school or formal training is one way that aspiring actors can begin to follow that path. But do all potential students start out the same way? Is the path to further study a given for Indigenous acting hopefuls? Are the experiences of formal actor-training the same for everyone? My research indicates that the answer to these questions is “no”. I begin this chapter by exploring why Indigenous graduates choose to study acting, when they do, and why at a formal training program or institute. More importantly, I will examine the very personal journey that some Indigenous acting hopefuls undertake to fulfil their dreams of becoming an actor. I will

⁹² In interview with John Clarke, former Director of the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), 1969–2004, 5 March 2009, Sydney.

also look at what the challenges are for Indigenous students in a mainstream actor-training context. Most Indigenous actors begin their careers enrolled in an Aboriginal-identified actor-training program. However, at some point during their training students will tend to take on the dominant values of the professional theatre industry, which suggest that “real” training occurs somewhere else. It happens away from family and friends in bigger towns and institutions where they teach in more specialised ways. Indigenous students, who go on to study at a mainstream acting institute, often find that journey not only challenging, but isolating, and Culturally confronting. In this chapter I examine more closely institutional influences on the Indigenous student experience of actor training, and I discuss the impact of these experiences on the development of their professional practice. I also look at the way institutes may, or may not, support students in this journey.

Where you from?

This heading reflects a type of question that Indigenous people may ask another when first meeting. I was not surprised to discover that many of the graduates I interviewed come from a regional city, or town. According to figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008), over two thirds (68%) of Indigenous people in Australia live outside the major cities with 44% living in regional areas, and over 24% living in remote areas. By contrast 68% of all Australians live in major cities. This may explain why seven of the ten Indigenous students I interviewed came from places like Fremantle (southern Western Australia), Derby (northern Western Australia), Maryborough (southern Queensland), Maroochydore (southern Queensland), Buldah (northern Victoria), and

Brewarrina (north-western NSW). In these localities (especially those in more rural areas) actor-training may not be seen as a practical career path. Any acting that does take place in many of these areas is usually with local amateur companies. For aspiring actors, there is often little opportunity beyond these outlets.

Ben Graetz is one of the few graduates interviewed who grew up in a capital city, Darwin, in the Northern Territory. He felt, however, that he had to leave Darwin to go to a bigger city to pursue an acting career because for him there was nothing in Darwin. He moved 4,000 kilometers south to Perth to start his acting career. For aspiring Indigenous acting students, it is more often the case than not that they will leave close family and friend networks. Andrea James, who grew up in Buldah, a small town in the north of Victoria, made tracks towards Melbourne to study. Both Graetz and James left for similar reasons. While Graetz felt that there was “nothing in Darwin”, James describes a more familiar narrative: “There was a bit of drunken singing around at home but nothing else. Formal study seemed to be a good option.” Like James, for Law, who was raised in Maryborough in southern Queensland, enrolling in an actor-training program was not only about seeking opportunity, but also finding out what actual life and employment prospects existed outside of his familiar environment.

Choosing the right path

How then do Indigenous acting hopefuls like Law, Andrea and Ben from towns and cities in Australia learn about careers in acting, or the choices available to them to study in the performing arts, especially if there is “not much going on” in these areas?

What most Indigenous graduates articulated was that family and community played a strong role in their decision to take those first steps towards leaving and further training. Rather than the more common pathway from the completion of secondary school to tertiary training, a high number of Indigenous graduates spoke of family as the “push factor”. In the case of Indigenous students, family can mean “extended” family, which may also include friends and family of distant cousins who sometimes follow kinship lines. Traditional family relationships in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are complex, and can differ from the notion of family in non-Indigenous cultures. Family is not always determined by blood; sometimes people from the same language group are also referred to as family.

Shakara Rose Walley, a WAAPA Aboriginal theatre graduate, spoke of how her family helped her in making a career choice as the theatre course at WAAPA was not her first training preference. She explains:

I actually didn't want to do it [the WAAPA Aboriginal theatre course]. My mother pushed me into it because I was doing youth work at the time but I became really bored with it, and she saw the course [WAAPA] had dancing in it, so she thought it would be a good opportunity for me to do something instead of just sitting around home.⁹³

⁹³ In interview with Shakara Rose Walley, 13 October 2008, Perth.

Similarly, Ben Graetz ended up studying acting because his cousin was moving to Perth to study. Although there was a theatre course running in Broome at the time that would have been closer to Darwin, Graetz, together with his cousin and some friends, travelled down to Perth, took rooms in a hostel and started looking for opportunities in the city. Going to an acting program was the next step for Graetz once he got himself to Perth. Without his friends and cousins he may not have made such a huge step of moving to a big city where training and many more opportunities existed for aspiring Indigenous actors.

For Jadah Plieter also it was through family (although not directly) and friend networks that she found out about the Michael Leslie music theatre program. She explains:

I had enrolled at a university, which had a completely different system, and I didn't feel much supported there. I didn't know where I was, or what I was doing, and I wasn't coping too well with it so I left. I then got a job in an Aboriginal Art Gallery and one of the guys there told me about an Aboriginal training course in Aboriginal music Theatre that Michael Leslie was heading up with WAAPA and Black Swan Theatre.⁹⁴

Initially following a path that many young Australians aspire to, a course of university study, Plieter chose to begin her acting career. Although there are strong

⁹⁴ Phone interview with Jadah Plieter, 31 October 2008.

family connection to the arts, and specifically to the performing arts, Plieter is the daughter of playwright and theatre director David Milroy, and niece of writer and artist Sally Morgan - Plieter did not choose a career solely on the basis of this. Instead, Plieter followed acting mainly due to a friend's advice but also, as she admitted in interview, out of a deep desire to gain some confidence in the world. Plieter saw herself as "very shy" and with "little confidence" before taking on actor training. She saw acting as a way of building up her self-confidence, and her belief at the time was that acting would provide her with what she describes as "the ability to be in the world". That world, I suggest, is the world away from family, friends and strong community connections.

For Walley, like Graetz and Plieter, career advice came from within the set of connections displayed in Aboriginal communities, through close friends and family networks. The push, however, from community for Indigenous students to enrol in an acting course is not generally toward a mainstream institute or program, but rather it is in the direction of the Aboriginal-identified courses and colleges. This may be the result of a number of factors. For Indigenous Australians, performing is considered part of Indigenous heritage and Cultural expression. The passing down of ancestral stories and Dreaming often takes place through dance, song and/or in a visual representation like a painting or tree scarring.⁹⁵ The idea of furthering knowledge through performance is not something new for Indigenous communities. In contemporary times, however, this path may often now lead to tertiary performance and actor-training programs.

⁹⁵ Tree scarring, or carved trees (dendroglyphs), are a custom of the Gamilaroi people in the central north-west of NSW. Their tree carvings were designed around powerful symbols used for boys being ushered into manhood at elaborate ceremonies called "bora".

Advice from relatives and friends to consider attending an Aboriginal-identified program is often given, since they may know of other community members enrolled in the program, or who have graduated from a particular identified course. More importantly, they know there will be other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—staff and students—at the institution. For aspiring students who move away from family and friend networks, many do find that at an Aboriginal-identified school, they come in contact with friend, relatives, or friends of relatives, who have also moved and are living in and around the city. It is also often the case that identified schools will be closely linked to the local communities where extended family support networks exist.

UWS graduate Lily Shearer moved from Brewarrina to Sydney to get an education. The determining factor in her choice to audition for an acting program centered on the support and close networks of family and friends in the Penrith area. Shearer explains: “I was a single mother of three and UWS was close to home” (she was living in Penrith at the time). When she began her career, Shearer already had her own family to look after. This is often the case for many Aboriginal women who realise the importance of education to employment outcomes and begin their careers only after starting families.

For prospective students like Lily, having wider community networks helps them succeed in taking on such challenges and the demands of tertiary training programs when they are also juggling family commitments. It is my experience also (from teaching at Eora) that many of the Eora students had families they were caring for whilst taking on full-time study. For many young mothers who come through the

Aboriginal-identified programs, the courses not only provide the opportunity to re-enter the education and training sector, they offer support from extended community networks. As a result, many go on to further study (although not always in acting). Subsequent to her training, Lily has worked successfully as a performer and producer within Aboriginal communities across the greater Sydney area for over twenty years.

For many Indigenous acting hopefuls, coming from mainly regional cities and towns, the first step towards formal education is a courageous one as they will leave not only family and community but also, I argue, a connection to land and Culture. In the last chapter I proposed that Culture is at the heart of Aboriginal performance practice. At these colleges, as discussed, an engagement with Culture is possible through contact with extended family and community networks. More importantly, Aboriginal-identified programs and schools often have close connections to the local community, where many Cultural events and opportunities for a Cultural engagement are available.

For the Indigenous acting student beginning the first step towards a chosen career, the Aboriginal-identified programs not only offer them their first encounter with formal training, but also offer pathways to further training. These identified courses mostly start at Certificate two or three level, and completion of the Certificate three is equivalent to a Year 12 or leaving Certificate. Some identified courses go on to offer Certificate four and Diploma level programs. Most of the mainstream acting programs on the other hand require at least a Year 12 Certificate, or an equivalent level qualification to qualify for audition. There are exceptions, but most Indigenous students do not follow the same career or training trajectory as many non-Indigenous

acting students applying for mainstream drama schools, who for the most part often graduate from secondary schooling with higher leaving certificates. It is the case that many Indigenous students did not complete this level of schooling.

According to the recent Australian Government Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (2011), 9.1% of Indigenous students nationally left school before year 10, compared with only 0.2% of all students.⁹⁶ Many Indigenous students do not make it to Year 11 or 12, let alone complete their higher secondary certificates, although completion rates have increased by 7% in 20011 compared to 2006 ABS data.⁹⁷ And it is not surprising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth living in regional areas are less likely to have completed Year 12 compared with those from non-regional areas (Long & Batten, 1998, p. 89). Many Indigenous students begin their acting careers by starting out from Indigenous programs because of this. Once they graduate from an Aboriginal-identified program, however, they may be eligible for further study at mainstream actor-training programs.

If the identified programs can offer Indigenous students extended community connections, plus opportunities to engage with Culture, and pathways to further education and employment opportunities, what then do mainstream programs offer Indigenous students besides a higher qualification? For those who do go on to a mainstream institute it is the promise of something far more elusive, something that Indigenous programs do not seem to offer, or at least not in the way they present

⁹⁶ Chapter 4, School Education, Figure (4.1).

⁹⁷ 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/2076.0Media%20Release12011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=2076.0&issue=2011&num=&view=>

themselves, and that feature is “professionalism”. For academic, Ian Watson, this is a paradigmatic dilemma in actor training, one that is based on an “identity formed by a professional genealogy of those with whom one studies, and not by the country in which one lives or by the ethnic group to which one belongs” (2003, p. 40). For Watson, the suggestion of “professional” training has serious cultural undertones that confront the ethnicity and cultural identity of some students. For a certain number of Indigenous students this paradigm can be quite a challenging one to navigate once accepted into a mainstream acting program.

Bright Shiny Futures

I knew that it was going to be three years and a bit hard yakka. I was young, passionate, and ready to jump into it. I was ready to handle anything people threw at me. The expectation was that it would be tough. I knew it would be non-Indigenous. WAAPA had Indigenous content. I knew it was more about going into the real world.⁹⁸

As mentioned, many aspiring Indigenous actors do go on to study at a mainstream program after graduating from an Aboriginal-identified actor-training program, knowing that they are non-Indigenous training facilities. Why then do they choose to do this? The above quote from Graetz explains that he went on to audition for NIDA because he felt that the Aboriginal-identified program at WAAPA only offered “basic

⁹⁸ In interview with Ben Graetz, 23 July 2008, Sydney.

skills”, and that if he wanted to be a “serious” actor he would have to go to the “best” in Australia, and for Graetz that meant auditioning for NIDA. Similarly, Fred Copperwaite (who did not attend an identified program as it was not on offer at WAAPA at the time) mentioned in interview that he chose to train at the WAAPA mainstream program because of the reputation of the program as being “professional, yet respectful”. The general perception is that these programs are where the “real” training happens and that they are the “best” and most “professional” programs available in Australia, and it is this that underpins the choice of Indigenous acting graduates to go on to study at mainstream actor-training programs.

The perception exists that better training is on offer at mainstream actor-training institutes than those run and delivered at Aboriginal colleges and programs. At some point, Indigenous students also come to believe this. But just what “professionalism” in acting means is rarely ever articulated, it is an aspiration achievable it seems only, it seems, by a mainstream actor training-program. Professionalism is an outcome that institutes propagate on their web sites, and, as discussed in chapter 2, it is also an expectation of graduates from the entertainment industry. Indigenous theatre practices on the other hand may or may not be deemed by the entertainment industry as professional in the same way. All of these things contribute to the perception of many Indigenous students that mainstream training programs offer so much more than Indigenous counterparts.

According to Casey, historically, critics from industry have framed Indigenous theatre (theatre written, acted and produced by Indigenous theatre makers) mostly as “community” rather than “professional” (2004, p. 106). Some critics often struggle to

acknowledge Indigenous actors as professional unless they are performing in mainstream productions. This framing can also be seen in more recent times. In a Sydney Morning Herald review of Beck Cole's new film, *Here I Am* (2011) starring Shai Pittman, (who was an Eora acting student), the headline reads: "Untrained and Unleashed: novices steal the spotlight" (2011). Garry Maddox writes: "A new batch of Australian films showcase the talents of non-actors: people who have never acted before, but who deliver compelling performances regardless". At the end of the article the former head of acting at NIDA, Tony Knight comments that:

Untrained actors delivering naturalistic performances, which dates back to the French and Italian cinema in the 1960s, absolutely works for certain films with a good director in charge. But unless they get training, they often become one-hit wonders.

The article has a particular focus on four recently released films, *Mad Bastards*, *Snowtown*, *Toomela* and *Here I Am*. All of these films feature Indigenous actors (Eora graduate Richard Green appears in *Snowtown*). In the Maddox article these films are all then compared with other Indigenous films:

They join such acclaimed films as *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Ten Canoes*, *Beneath Clouds*, *Son of a Lion* and *Samson & Delilah* in telling stories specific to particular communities—often Aboriginal—with "non-actors" excelling in starring roles.

The review is double-handed; on one side it applauds the work of “first time” Indigenous actors, on the other it positions them as “non-actors”. The assumption is that none of the Indigenous actors in any of these films has been trained; at least that is Knight’s position. However, many of the actors have either been to an Identified actor-training program, or have had on set training from Aboriginal professional actors (the child actors in *Rabbit Proof Fence* were tutored by Rachel Maza). Pittman, although framed as an “untrained actor” did study acting at Eora as did Richard Green, and yet this training is not taken into consideration as part of the assessment of her work. It is reasonable for people to consider the completion of a tertiary degree as “training”. However, as I stated in chapter 3, the Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs will, for the most part, never be considered actor “training” as long as they only offer certificate level qualifications.

For the Indigenous graduates of Aboriginal-identified programs, mainstream actor-training programs hold the promise of a “professional” career in contrast to a career in “community” theatre. This is the message also from industry, trainers and in some cases staff at both the mainstream and the identified programs. There is nothing particularly wrong with this assumption. The mainstream courses are longer, they give degrees in acting, and they have some of the country’s finest teachers. It is the message that I find unsettling, and it is this that I want to consider further. For me this perception has, I suggest, some very unpleasant side effects for Indigenous acting students, and graduates.

Watson, whom I quoted earlier in this chapter, when writing about American actor training, suggests that for graduate actors a type of cultural affiliation occurs that is mostly based on one's professional identity rather than bloodlines or borders (2003, p. 39). Graduate actors from American schools are in many ways similar to graduates of mainstream Australian actor-training programs. Both come from a conservatory based approach to acting, the approaches to acting in both countries is centered on Western and European acting practices, and both, I argue (like Watson on American drama programs), lean strongly towards creating a "professional" rather than a "personal" identity for the performer. What Watson refers to above, is for me, much like something also articulated by some Indigenous actors, and highlighted in Julian Meyrick's interview with Wayne Blair (2009).

Blair trained at the acting program on offer at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), a higher educational institution acting course based on a conservatory-style program. This QUT acting course will, according to its website, "educate, train and nurture your creative potential from a novice to a professional".⁹⁹ After graduating, Blair, throughout his illustrious career, went on to perform with mainstream companies such as the Bell Shakespeare Company in classics such as *Othello* as Othello, and in Aboriginal roles in works like Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers*. In the Meyrick article, Blair describes himself as an actor (professional identity) and as an Aboriginal man (personal identity). In the following quotes Blair talks about being an Indigenous person and his work in the European canon:

⁹⁹ Queensland University of Technology website. URL: <http://www.qut.edu.au/study/courses/bachelor-of-fine-arts/bachelor-of-fine-arts-acting>.

I have a lot of responsibilities, not just to myself but to a few communities. [...]. To these communities, or clan groups, I have a responsibility, both in private, and in public...because they hear about the crap that you do (p.158).

He then talks about this professional life:

In the last couple of years, when I get reviews or people comment on my work, it's no longer "Indigenous actor" or "Indigenous writer or director" it is just "director Wayne Blair" (p. 159).

What Blair articulates here, in the later quote, is the experience that comes when you are no longer defined by your personal identity, but by your professional identity. This for Blair seems to be a level of accomplishment. This is not to say that Blair trades his Aboriginality to be acknowledged as a professional actor, instead I would argue, Blair is commenting on his recognition of this situation. This is also evident in the following quote when he describes how his Aboriginality supports his work as a professional actor.

The way I attack plays people might argue is naïve, but there is a uniqueness there, and I love that...At this stage I am finding being a Butchalla man from Queensland, from a place like Rockhampton of 50,000 people—the beef capital of Australia—has helped me live in

Darlington, Sydney, and be an associate artist at Belvoir Street [Theatre] ... It has given me a unique view on things” (Meyrick, 2009, p. 159).

For Blair, in a similar way to Enoch and Page whom I cite in the introduction of this thesis, his Cultural background provides a basis for his practice, and being Aboriginal is central, in many ways, to that practice. In the article “The Bennelong Complex” (2008), I argued that Indigenous actors need not forgo their identity while traversing multiple sites between and betwixt cultures throughout their professional lives. To be identified as an Aboriginal actor while also being considered professional, plus having all the privileges that the mainstream world of acting offers is not and should not be impossible. Many Indigenous actors do it, like Ernie Dingo, Rachel Maza and Rhoda Roberts, to name a few. However, the perception still exists in the industry and among students and to some extent staff at many of the actor-training programs, that in order to be recognised as a “real” actor, Indigenous actors must prove themselves through a mainstream training program, and in non-identified acting roles. For Indigenous acting students (especially those who want to be taken seriously) the “professional” identity becomes the goal, and I argue this approach can often challenge the place of one’s Cultural identity.

So far in this chapter, I have highlighted some of the reasons why Indigenous students choose to take the formal study path to acting. The key issues that emerge from this discussion relate to how potential Indigenous acting students engage with concepts such as identity, professionalism, and family in their pursuit of this

aspiration. For potential Indigenous acting students these issues are not always foregrounded during their quest to be an actor, instead these challenges seem very much part of that journey and, I suggest, part of what it means to be an Indigenous actor. This will become clearer as I continue this investigation by discussing the Indigenous graduate experiences of two of the mainstream acting programs with the aim of finding out how these institutes support, or not, Indigenous students in navigating these particular issues.

The Indigenous student experience of mainstream actor training

Of the Indigenous graduates who went on to study at mainstream acting programs most described their experiences as culturally confronting, isolating and foreign. Andrea James who studied at VCA describes her experience as learning “Western practices”. Although VCA does not necessarily articulate one particular practice, it has at times delivered specific approaches to acting (depending on who is in charge), like former Head of the VCA Drama School, Lindy Davies’ preference for “Impulse Work”¹⁰⁰ (O’Connor, 2006, p. 47). VCA does not have a written mandate to follow any particular acting practice; it does not claim to follow any either, yet it continues to deliver a Western-European centric approach. More importantly it is this approach that is considered by VCA to be the right approach to train all actors and theatre practitioners.

VCA graduate Plieter describes her experience of actor-training at VCA as similar to that of James, but articulates this in a different way. When asked what “actor training” means, she responded:

¹⁰⁰ This is a technique that explores getting into the world of the play and character through a process of doing, rather than an analysis of text. Impulse work is less about using one’s imagination to create the world of the play, and more about being in the world of the play.

I think of a very English tradition of becoming a thespian. It doesn't really resonate with me those words. Because of my experience in the [Indigenous] acting training institution which seem imbued with all these other meanings and cultural terms of reference, they are very foreign to me. ¹⁰¹

For Plieter, her experience of mainstream theatre practice felt unfamiliar and different to her experiences of an Aboriginal-identified actor-training program. The centrality of Western and European approaches to mainstream actor-training programs was the major difference. She also articulated that she felt pressured to conform to the framework on offer at the expense of her own practice. She explains:

Training [at VCA] came to mean that it was a process, I guess assimilation is too much of a loaded term, but a process of being deconstructed and reconstructed into a particular model. With a set of expectations that were unclear and changing. I think actor-training is situated within a particular cultural context. ¹⁰²

Assimilation *is* a loaded term. Introduced in Australia after the Aboriginal Welfare Conference (1937) “assimilation” became official policy and the term used to effectively remove Aboriginal children of “mixed-blood” away from families and

¹⁰¹ Phone interview with Jadah Plieter, 31 October 2008.

¹⁰² Phone interview with Jadah Plieter, 31 October 2008.

communities to boarding schools and girls' and boys' homes in big cities, while those still living customary ways were to stay on reserves. It was not until after 1967 referendum that national legislative reform was introduced by the federal government to free Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from these often state based laws.

The experience of assimilation is still fresh in the minds of many who grew up in that period between 1937 and 1967; and still resonates in the lives of many Aboriginal people, their families and communities. These are the parents and grandparents of the Indigenous students who come to big cities to learn the “best” and most “professional” acting practices in the country. When an Indigenous student compares a mainstream acting program to assimilation, I suggest this is because they feel similarly isolated (like removed Indigenous children) in an environment that is predominantly Western. I also suggest that the practices and processes delivered in many mainstream programs compound this feeling of isolation.

In Plieter's case, her needs were not supported by the VCA program, as VCA acting Dean Murphett explained earlier in this chapter acknowledging that there was some discussion on how the drama school might be able to include the needs of the Indigenous student. However, there was not much follow up in this area. Like his other mainstream counterparts, Jackson and Williams from NIDA, Murphett does show an interest in developing or including Indigenous performance practices into the acting program, but somehow it always falls into the “too hard basket”. Murphett suggests that after graduating, opportunities exist for Indigenous actors to better critically engage with their practice, understand the relationship and responsibilities of that practice to their communities, and demonstrate a familiarity with new debates on

Indigenous theatre practices, whilst also demonstrating a “professional” practice.

Yet, these expectations are not articulated to students by the institute managers or teachers. Instead, they maintain a very strict adherence to the current approaches in actor-training.

One common approach to acting in many mainstream acting programs is the idea and practice of the “neutral” actor, one present and ready to take on the sign of another. This neutrality can be achieved by a number of different methodologies. The most commonly used are those derived from the works of Stanislavski and Jerzy Grotowski.¹⁰³ Stanislavski proposes that neutrality can be achieved through the accumulation of acting skills, like voice and movement, which contribute to the proficiency and flexibility of a performer. For Stanislavski, talent was not enough: “one needs ability, technique, and art” (1985, p. 287). For him, acting students learn through repetition, by passing through many levels of skills, and through that repetition, the residual natural tendencies (those attributes, habits and nuances of an actor’s own personality) can be overwritten, with the actor becoming more flexible and adept at achieving the “natural” tendencies of another character.

Alternatively, Grotowski’s “*Via Negativa*” approach to training is a process whereby a performer’s psychophysical and vocal blocks can be eradicated not by a deductive method of collecting skills, but rather by the “ripening” of the actor which is expressed by tension towards the extreme by a complete stripping down, and laying bare. (1969, p. 16). Grotowski’s process searches for a “universality” that transcends culture, moving towards a primal inherent humanity that all humans can experience

¹⁰³ Jerzy Grotowski was a Polish-born stage director. He joined the Polish Laboratory Theatre of Wrocław in 1959 and founded a permanent company, The Laboratory Theatre, in 1965.

regardless of cultural upbringing. As well as Grotowski, other theatre practitioners like Eugenio Barba have also explored the notion of the “universal performer”. However, in attempting to construct a “universal theatre” practice has for Barba drawn many opponents, who suggest that his methods, like Grotowski’s, challenge cultural diversity in theatre practice. One critic, Maria Shevtsova however argues that: “Barba does not reject the idea of cultural identity altogether. Nor does he deny that there are performative styles specific to cultures” (1993, p. 33). This is evident in a later work by Barba, “The Fiction of Duality” (1989), where he introduces the terms, the *incultured* and the *accultured* body.

For Barba, “each one of us is an *incultured* body. We use a daily body technique which derives from the culture in which we have been born, from our family environments, from our work” (1989, p. 312). This idea is not dissimilar to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, where we embody our social origins, our experiences and our geographies of self, as it were. The *accultured* body on the other hand “is programmed from the outside”, which Barba likens to “Frankenstein’s monster” (1989, p. 312). It is a body developed fragment-by-fragment, limb-by-limb, function-by-function, and thereby re-composed. It is an “artificial body” (1989, p. 312). Barba’s suggests however that through repetition techniques, new internal narratives can be absorbed which becomes “second nature”, and for Barba “every trace of Frankenstein disappears. The spectator, according to Barba will be struck not by the performer’s strange physical dynamic, but by the *organicity* which emerges from it” (1989, p. 312). The performer in fully accepting the *illusio* of duality enters into a “junction where the real and the imaginary, the concrete and the abstract, the physical

and the mental meet” (Barba, 1989, p. 312).

The idea of “Neutrality” is an ideal that is also aspired to in an Australian context, according to Paul Moore in his doctoral thesis, “Longing to Belong: Trained Actors Attempts to Enter the Profession” (2005). Moore acknowledges, from his own personal experience, that a great deal of actor-training involves rigorous exercises aimed at neutralising the physical expressions of a student’s symptoms of *habitus*. In his exploration of Bourdieu’s *habitus* and its relationship to actor training in Australia, Moore describes *habitus* as the process where people internalize their social surroundings and creatively tend toward recreating them. It is the embodiment of social origins and experiences, which determine that which is experienced as “natural”. The physical manifestation of *habitus* may be observed, according to Moore, in body language accents, in taste, clothing and recreational pursuits (2005, p. 43).

For the Indigenous student who chooses to train at a mainstream acting program these methodologies and approaches can seem overwhelming and frightening. This may be the case for all acting students. However, for NIDA graduate Leon Burchill, they are so foreign and confronting that he felt that the very core of his identity was challenged.

At the start of this chapter I presented a quote from John Clarke, former NIDA CEO, on his relationship with Burchill during his studies at NIDA. Burchill had come from a strong Cultural background, having also studied at ACPA at Swinburne Aboriginal community theatre program in Melbourne. Clarke, as quoted earlier, felt in some way that Burchill was having trouble with the NIDA actor-training program, so he took Burchill out on his boat to the Hawkesbury River. In describing that day

Clarke tells of how a sea eagle flew overhead, and how that this event elevated Burchill's mood. Burchill turned to Clarke and told him that he felt better having seen his totem (sea eagle), and that everything would be all right now. For many Aboriginal people birds are messengers who bring news from friends and family either living or departed. For Burchill the sight of the sea eagle on that day at that time was something he may have interpreted as a positive omen for his studies. The troubles he was experiencing at NIDA, I suggest, centered on a sense of disconnection from Culture, family and friends. For Burchill, seeing the sea eagle was a profound moment, and a feeling of relief followed, including a sense that he felt that he was on the right path. Clarke came to acknowledge the importance of this experience for Burchill as something specific to Burchill's Cultural connections.

It is well known among teachers at mainstream actor-training programs that most Indigenous students struggle in the first couple of years. Some teachers and managers, like Clarke, try to assist and support students within a very rigid training framework. In interview, NIDA acting teacher Kevin Jackson often referred to concessions made for Indigenous students at NIDA. These included time off for sorry business, and accommodation assistance for students with families. I spoke with Jackson about the perception that Indigenous students get preferential treatment, and that there was a special fund available for Indigenous students. He informed me that this was not the case and that financial assistance was available to all NIDA students. Jackson did feel, however, that Indigenous students at NIDA needed to open up about what they are going through; by this he meant in relation to identity and Culture, and

that there were opportunities as part of the delivery of the program where these issues could be dealt with. He explains:

One student who was full blood who was strongly culturally connected in his community used to tell us stories of how he lived in those communities. I thought it was essential that all students and staff should know what he was navigating by his engagement with his culture and in being here with us.¹⁰⁴

Although Jackson stumbles in using inappropriate language like “full blood” (a term not used in official contexts since the Aboriginal Protection Board was overturned in 1967), he does, however, have a sense that some Indigenous students often come from communities where they are strongly connected, and that other students need to be reminded that Indigenous students travel great lengths to enroll in a mainstream program, and that there are particular Cultural issues that Indigenous students will be navigating during their time at a mainstream program. Sharing Cultural experiences with other students and teachers is a great way to bring attention to the many challenges that Indigenous students may be dealing with.

These issues, however, don’t just stop after Indigenous students graduate, and after three years of a mainstream acting experience, Indigenous graduates then face the realities of the profession, where the reality is that most will be cast in Aboriginal roles at sometime during their careers. This can also be true for other graduates from

¹⁰⁴ In interview with Kevin Jackson, 30 July 2008, Sydney.

culturally diverse backgrounds. However, for most Indigenous acting graduates of mainstream actor-training programs the reality is that very few will manage to secure non-identified acting roles after graduating. The rare examples are actors like Deborah Mailman from the television series *Secret Life of Us*, and Aaron Pedersen from *City Homicide*. However, both did start out by playing Aboriginal-identified roles. Mailman not only began an Indigenous theatre company with Wesley Enoch but also starred in *Seven Stages of Grieving* (1996). This play is considered one of the key Indigenous texts in contemporary Indigenous theatre history. Pedersen appeared in the television series *Heartland* (1994). He also starred early on in his career in the movie *Dead Heart* (1996). Both actors have played more mainstream roles than identified ones during their predominately television careers. The same cannot be said for the majority of mainstream acting graduates.

Summary

The formal training path that many Indigenous students take to be an actor in Australia is a distinctively marked one. That journey is often guided by a common history and by shared experiences. Historically, institutional settings were for many Indigenous Australians mostly defined by policies that positioned Culture as something to be controlled and replaced with the broader “Australian values”. There are still living memories among many communities of these experiences, which will often influence intergenerational perceptions of institutions, and which sometimes also guide much of the career advice provided by family and friend networks to aspiring actors in their communities. Indeed, the fact is that most Indigenous graduates begin their training

and subsequent careers from advice from family and friend networks. This is often towards identified actor-training programs that they already know about, or know someone who has also gone to one of these programs at some time.

Indigenous acting students in preparation for further study, at a mainstream or Aboriginal-identified actor-training program, often have to navigate issues such as identity, professionalism, and family in their pursuit of those aspirations. Whilst the Aboriginal-identified programs are very much aware of these issues, they are not always acknowledged by the mainstream institutes. For those Indigenous graduates who do decide to further their studies in acting, the possibility of continuing at an identified program is not possible. Mainstream actor-training programs not only offer higher level training with degrees in acting, they also provide “professional” training. Many Indigenous graduates aspire to this ideal and apply to these institutions to become “real” actors, as opposed to “community” actors. The experience once at a mainstream program can, however, be quite a daunting one.

At mainstream actor-training programs many Indigenous students struggle in the first few years with the centrality of Western and European acting practices and methodologies. The most significant hurdle is the perceived lack of Cultural engagement or Indigenous perspectives on offer at mainstream actor training programs. This situation does not, in the short term, look like changing, for Indigenous students or for the programs themselves.

Once students graduate, however, the very specific environmental and Cultural aspects of what it is to be an Indigenous Australian become critically relevant, as many Indigenous graduates either go on to play primarily Indigenous roles, or return to their

communities to work. This means that for many Indigenous graduates, reconnecting with community and Culture is also a central part in the journey of becoming an Indigenous actor in Australia.

The aim of the last two chapters was to draw some understanding, from interviews undertaken as part of research, of where, when and how Indigenous students are able to engage critically with Culture in a meaningful way during the course of their training to be an actor. The intention has also been to examine what critical differences may exist between the Aboriginal-identified and mainstream actor training programs, and to investigate what is actually on offer at a mainstream program for Indigenous acting students.

In the beginning of this thesis I introduced a model for interpreting the cultural exchanges that may exist between different cultural contexts, with Indigenous students placed at the centre of that exchange. I will now discuss some of the findings of this research using that framework to interpret the multiplicity of cultural encounters that the Indigenous student experiences and negotiates during their training to be an actor.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This dissertation provides a discourse on and around the training of Indigenous actors in Australia. I began this thesis with a quote from Sonny Dallas Law who told me that what he wanted from his actor-training experience was to learn more about his Culture, the history of Indigenous theatre in Australia, and about the people who contributed to that history (what he refers to as “role models”). Law also told me that this was important to him because when he graduated into what he called, “the mainstream world” he was going to tell his stories, from his Culture, and of his experiences in a form that he described as “mainstream with a twist”. In that one quote Law inadvertently discloses the importance and meaning of Culture as central to his practice as an actor and theatre maker, as well as a need to know about the history and heritage of Indigenous theatre practice. Law also reveals much about the perceived dominance of mainstream actor-training practices over his own practice.

This thesis undertook to answer three key questions arising from what I interpreted as key issues in the experiences of training for Indigenous actors. Firstly, given that Culture is considered so important by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre-makers to their practice, where are the opportunities for such an engagement with Culture as part of vocational training? Secondly, insofar as such opportunities do exist, how can we account for the differences between the various professional training programs available to Indigenous actors and what do these differences mean for students and their teachers? Thirdly, how do institutes support Indigenous students in

developing an acting practice, which, I argued, draws heavily on a unique history, and on particular Cultural practices.

In this chapter, as well as summarising the main findings of my research into a framework for understanding cultural exchanges, I want also to draw together some observations and lines of argument that have been somewhat more implicit throughout the thesis, about how and why changes might be possible in the ways that training institutions engage with Indigenous students. In outlining the latter, I take a broader view looking at the types of influences currently occurring outside that may have some impact on the very intimate world of these training domains.

Summary of key arguments

Critical differences exist between the experiences of Indigenous students at mainstream actor-training institutes from those at Aboriginal-identified programs. While the technical aspects of training differ from institution to institution, the similarities are more striking than the differences. Of far greater importance are the differences in the cultural context from one institution to another. Whatever institution they attend, the way in which Indigenous acting students experience, and make sense of, their training does not depend so much on the specific content or structure of classroom- and studio-based learning activities; rather, it is essentially defined by the much larger cultural and pedagogical frameworks within which these learning activities are embedded.

In investigating this argument, I presented a model that highlights the multiplicity of possible cultural experiences that Indigenous students may engage with

during their training to be an actor. This model was a starting point. In determining that training contexts are not culturally neutral, I examined the cultural influences underpinning each of the training contexts by examining the socio-political histories of each. For mainstream institutes, English and American derivatives of theatre practices, approaches and methodologies mostly form the foundation of the programs on offer. The Aboriginal-identified actor-training programs, on the other hand, are defined primarily by their identity as Aboriginal, and then by an attachment to Culture and community.

One of the significant differences between Aboriginal-identified and mainstream actor-training contexts is in the acknowledgement, or not, of Culture as meaningful to acting, performance and theatre making practice for Aboriginal people. At Aboriginal-identified acting programs, Culture is explicit. The way in which Culture is dealt with or enacted in these training contexts, however, is not by way of structured classroom delivery. Instead, Culture is mostly exchanged through informal interactions between Aboriginal students and staff. Culture is also inherent in the delivery of Aboriginal perspectives from Aboriginal teachers and guest lecturers. Then, by way of performance, it is enacted, presented and exchanged. In an Aboriginal-identified actor-training program, for the most part, that exchange will be intra-cultural, between Aboriginal and to some extent Torres Strait Islander peoples.

However, Aboriginal programs do have non-Indigenous student populations and non-Indigenous staff. This means that these exchanges will also often support cross-cultural experiences, in a discursive space where multiple experiences converge, and where the interaction is not determined by any specificity of location. In other

words, these exchanges occur in very informal ways. Hence, the cross-cultural experience is often framed as if occurring in a space of neutrality, an encounter that could happen anywhere at anytime, not subject to the exercise of power or control. From my perspective, and drawing on the insights of the students and teachers whom I've interviewed, the space in which cross-cultural experiences occur can be a constructed space (like a classroom), where issues of power are certainly at stake, but where shared Cultural experiences are nevertheless possible. In an Aboriginal-identified actor-training context the Aboriginal Culture being enacted, exchanged and experienced can retain its integrity. Although for me the word "authentic" represents a loaded concept, in an Aboriginal context, the idea of an authentic Aboriginal experience can be explored or experienced through the presence of other Indigenous students and staff.

In the actor-training programs on offer at most Aboriginal-identified schools, Indigenous students also experience an inter-cultural dynamic, influenced by a broader pedagogical and cultural framework that is in itself inherently Western. English and American theatre methodologies and practices are dominant core deliverables and infuse even basic skills like voice, movement and to a lesser extent singing at Aboriginal programs. The inter-cultural is the meeting between two or more cultures but is predicated on difference. No real exchange of culture takes place. The inter-cultural is the display of difference. Therefore, inter-cultural performance practice is the condition under which the spectacle of difference emerges. In inter-cultural exchanges it is the mediation of differences, rather than the exploration of cultures that takes place. Issues of power and economics are also at work in this site. For Indigenous

students the knowable set of dominant theatre practices are mostly framed as “mainstream”, and at some point in their training these practices will come to direct the perceived value of their own practices as secondary to mainstream.

At mainstream actor-training sites, Indigenous students often, though not always, struggle to some extent to maintain their Cultural identity against the dominance of mainstream or Western theatre practices. In this space mainstream programs struggle to know and understand Indigenous Culture and its place in mainstream actor training. For Indigenous student actors who want to study at a mainstream actor-training institute the experience is acutely inter-cultural.

The ambiguity of the cultural framework underpinning mainstream training contexts can at times also be unsettling for many Indigenous acting students. Leon Burchill is one such student who struggled with the approaches and methodologies he encountered while at a mainstream acting program. The idea of a universal acting practice that many mainstream training programs employ (although this is not always clearly articulated), challenges the very core of an Indigenous student’s identity, which is closely aligned with Culture and community. Having, in many instances, moved away from family and community to study at a large institute in the big city, the practice of “stripping down” or “laying bare” (or building up) to achieve the “neutrality” of an actor is perceived by some, like Jadah Plieter, as an act of integration or indoctrination to Western theatre practices. Maybe it is, but what also needs to be considered is that when Indigenous actors graduate, they are still Indigenous, and they will mostly be required to be so by the industry they graduate into, and by the family they return home to. If Culture is central to their practice as Indigenous actors, and to

theatre making, then this also needs to be taken into consideration when training them.

Mainstream actor-training programs are not culturally neutral. They are inherently Western, and they subscribe to theatre practices from the European and American canons. They do not generally engage with the notion of Culture as central to an Indigenous actor's practice. Instead, they maintain a "same training for everyone" approach. However, there are moments when cross-cultural exchanges occur. These happen when students are required to devise a performance. In devising performance (as opposed to "acting") practitioners do not base their work upon characters created by other artists, but upon their own bodies, their own autobiographies their own specific experiences in culture or in the world (Carlson, 2004, p. 5). The cross-culture experience is the spontaneous display of these experiences.

Both Aboriginal-identified and mainstream actor-training programs offer a range of pedagogical and cultural experiences. For the Indigenous student, these experiences can at times be challenging, while at other times liberating, as in the case of Leon. No matter what those experiences are, they will be mostly influenced by a multiplicity of cultural exchanges taking place at any given time during their training to be an actor. For mainstream institutes change is difficult, so too is their ability to embrace different approaches to acting practices as in those articulated by Indigenous graduates. However, in the time it has taken to write thesis, there have been some developments in the area of practice from the Indigenous theatre and training sectors. There have also been changes to Indigenous policies and directions from governments, and some of these may have implications for the Indigenous theatre and training sectors. I now discuss these initiatives and changes in the section that follows.

Future directions

This thesis focuses on a specific field of activity, from the particular viewpoints of Indigenous graduates, teachers, and trainers of actor-training programs and institutes in Australia. It is a study of the world-views of the inhabitants of a mostly closed world. However, it is a world not entirely unaffected by societal and political changes, as implied throughout this thesis. Nor is this world impervious to movements from within the performing arts sector, especially the Indigenous theatre sector, where there is ongoing national debate on practice and training. Both local and national developments currently taking place will in time come to influence the current pedagogical and cultural landscape of actor-training for Indigenous students.

At present there are national debates within the Indigenous arts sector about contemporary Indigenous theatre practice. Questions are being asked like: what is Indigenous theatre, what would an Indigenous specific theatre training curriculum look like, and where are the spaces for Indigenous actors and theatre makers to critically engage within their own practice? These directives are being driven from within the Indigenous theatre sector itself. These are not lone voices, however. What is also happening at this time is that governments and non-government agencies are listening. This has not always been the case. The Queensland Government and the Australia Council for the Arts are driving the Cairns National Indigenous Theatre Forum (NITF) initiative, with government representatives from each state also in attendance. Since 2010, each year, Indigenous theatre practitioners and arts workers have met in Cairns as part of the Cairns Indigenous Arts Festival. In 2011 it was announced at the Forum

that the Queensland government intends to continue the Forum until 2015. (This now seems unlikely given the current cuts to the arts sector from the newly elected state government). Outcomes of previous Forums include: the National Indigenous Emerging Producers program funded by the Australia Council, in response to a perceived gap in Indigenous theatre producers nationally; the Indigenous training network¹⁰⁵, and the Forum Indigenous publishing working group¹⁰⁶. At the very least, forums such as this provide knowledge of the needs and gaps of the Indigenous theatre sector. They also provide a platform for change.

Within the Indigenous training sector other changes are underway. At NAISDA, a uniquely Indigenous-specific dance curriculum is being developed that will incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander movement and dance techniques from various communities nationally into key deliverables of dance practice. What this means is that in addition to the inclusion of, for example, ballet practice, or Martha Graham techniques, a core component of the NAISDA program will engage with specific Indigenous dance techniques from all around the country. This is different to the Cultural engagement through dance already on offer at NAISDA. NAISDA does bring in dancers from community. However, this experience is often framed as Cultural practice, not dance practice. In the future these exchanges will be more technically structured, with the Cultural exchange occurring formally as well as informally.

¹⁰⁵ Led by ACPA this network will bring together the Aboriginal-identified programs nationally to discuss initiatives and future directions in actor-training for Indigenous actors.

¹⁰⁶ This group will seek publishing opportunities for Indigenous theatre makers and arts workers to investigate such questions as: what is Indigenous theatre?

Indigenous dance company, Bangarra, has created contemporary (dance) performances from such exchanges for some time now. However, this particular practice took place only after dancers already had extensive training in primarily Western techniques.

News of NAISDA's programming has reached ACPA, which is now also considering developing models in voice and movement with Indigenous perspectives. Currently, most voice training requires students to practise the approaches of Cicely Berry¹⁰⁷, Kristin Linklater,¹⁰⁸ or Bill Pepper.¹⁰⁹ These approaches are designed for the English-speaking actor, and although Indigenous actors do speak English, many also speak their own language, or will increasingly be inspired to do so especially in a theatre context. Further, many Indigenous actors are required at some point in their working lives to speak with an Indigenous accent. In developing the range and tone of the voice through an engagement with Indigenous movement techniques, it is possible for Indigenous students to develop clarity and volume without compromising their own unique pronunciation. In advocating for this opportunity for Indigenous student actors, I also acknowledge that learning mainstream voice techniques is also just as important to the craft of acting.

In the area of government there have also been significant changes in thinking about Culture and its place in Aboriginal lives. In the past, as I outlined in Chapter 4, governments understood the relationship between education and economic outcomes

¹⁰⁷ A former voice director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Berry has written many books on speech and drama, including *The Voice and the Actor* (1973).

¹⁰⁸ Although born in Scotland and of Scandinavian descent, in the 1960s, Linklater relocated to the United States, where she practices voice training.

¹⁰⁹ Bill Pepper is an Australian voice teacher at NIDA. His methods, however, are heavily based on the works of Berry and Linklater.

for Indigenous Australians. Now, in 2012, Australian governments and policy makers are realising the important relationship between “Cultural attachment” and economic outcomes for Aboriginal people, and for “closing the gap” in disadvantage between Indigenous and mainstream Australia. The recently signed *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (2008) between the Commonwealth of Australia and the States and Territories, which implements intergovernmental reforms to address Indigenous disadvantage, states (in part):

Connection to culture is critical for emotional, physical and spiritual well being. Culture pervades the lives of Indigenous people and is a key factor in their wellbeing—culture must be recognised in actions intended to overcome Indigenous disadvantage.¹¹⁰

Governments, who signed up to this agreement have an obligation to consider Indigenous Culture and heritage as a priority policy area when looking at funding for either specific programs for Indigenous people or in developing future programs. If a connection to Culture is critical for the emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, then it is imperative that it be also be included in any program that engages with Indigenous people. In the performing arts, and specifically actor-training, this need is finally finding some ground, at least in the minds of Indigenous people who also now have the ear of government. Throwing money at these programs will not, however, achieve any meaningful outcomes. Instead, it will require further

¹¹⁰ Council of Australian Governments (COAG), *National Indigenous Reform Agreement*, 2008, p. 22.

research and development on Indigenous perspectives in performing arts and acting practices before schools and institutes can consider including them in their programs. Perhaps when this is done, mainstream actor-training programs may also consider including them, especially when engaging with Indigenous students and acting practice.

Culture also implies language, and government funds are being put towards language programs nationally for Indigenous communities. This will, it is hoped, herald a resurgence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, especially for Indigenous theatre makers. Language has always had a place in Indigenous theatre, as for example, in *No Sugar* by Jack Davis. That this continues to be the case is evident from recent productions like *Bloodlands*¹¹¹ at Belvoir Street Theatre, *Posts in the Paddock*,¹¹² and Trevor Jamieson's *Ngapartji Ngapartji*.¹¹³ Although mainstream actor-training programs may not currently have the capacity to deliver languages, they will be one day considered by the Aboriginal-identified training sector as relevant to Aboriginal theatre practice. It would also be of advantage for all students of mainstream acting programs to have some knowledge of or experience with these new practices being developed. They are uniquely Australian and derive from one of the oldest living cultures in the world.

Also as part of its commitment to the arts, the Federal government provides financial assistance to national centres of excellence that are pre-eminent in their artistic fields. The national performing arts training institutions receiving such

¹¹¹ *Bloodlands* is performed in Yolngu language and pidgin English. Instigated by Andrew Upton and Cate Blanchett in conversation with Stephen Page from Bangarra Dance Theatre, it was directed by Wayne Blair and performed at Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney in 2012.

¹¹² A co-production between Melbourne company My Darling Patricia and Moogahlin Performing Arts.

¹¹³ A Big hART production in the Pitjantjatjara language of the central Australian desert people.

assistance and include; The Australian Ballet School, Australian Film and Television School, Australian Academy of Music, National Institute of Circus Art, Flying Fruit Fly Circus, NIDA and NAISDA. This group is encouraged to work together on collaborative projects. With NAISDA in this cluster, there are possibilities for cross-cultural exchanges across organisations. There is also potential for the research that is being undertaken at NAISDA into Indigenous performance practice to inform the way national performing arts organisations engage with Indigenous students and their practice.

Other opportunities currently in progress include the National Curriculum Review, which has the potential for developing a more strategic approach to the inclusion of Culture and heritage across all areas of curriculum delivery. The recent Australian Government's discussion paper on a National Cultural Policy also encouraged input from across the arts and cultural sectors. The National Cultural Policy submission drafted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates at the 2011 National Indigenous Theatre Forum stated that the following actions should be considered by the Australian Government:

- The establishment of a National Indigenous Arts Training consortium to respond to the needs, gaps and opportunities within the Indigenous Performing Arts ecology.
- Resourcing and consolidation of education and training providers to develop a greater focus on apprenticeship based training and

learning and to validate this learning through acknowledgement of prior learning appraisals.

- The development and articulation of Indigenous pedagogy and methodology through Indigenous performance styles and organisational structures.¹¹⁴

These three points highlight some of the key themes discussed throughout this thesis. They are concrete outcomes that can be implemented by governments, and by the Indigenous performing arts sector itself that can begin to address the many concerns raised in this thesis. These include: more value attributed to the Aboriginal theatre and performance training sector; alternative approaches to training for Indigenous students; and the development of specific Indigenous curriculums that encompass the diversity of practices inherent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre and performance.

What these opportunities and initiatives signal is the chance for real reform around Cultural heritage in Australia. Cultural heritage includes not only “stones and bones” (an archeological view of heritage), it also encompasses Cultural expression, and acknowledges the strong connections between Cultural heritage and performance practice. These reforms have begun to influence the way Indigenous theatre practitioners, theatre trainers, institutions, and governments see Culture as intrinsic to Aboriginal people’s lives and economic sustainability. What acting programs now need to do is to take leadership in this area and begin to fully realise what these changes will

¹¹⁴ This document can be found at URL:
http://culture.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/submissions/submission_44_2NITF.pdf

mean, not only to the training of Indigenous actors, but also to the changing terrain into which they will graduate.

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APPENDIX A

To Whom It May Concern

I, Ms Michelle Blanchard, Deputy Director, Koori Centre, University of Sydney am writing to give my support to the research project, "**The Emergence of the Indigenous Actor in Australia: The Cultural, Social and Political influences on training**", to be undertaken by Liza-Mare Syron as part of a Doctor of Arts research component at the University of Sydney.

I believe this project will contribute to a greater understanding of the way in which actor-training organisations in Australia engage with Indigenous student actors and performers. I support the inclusion of providing the opportunity for Indigenous graduates to speak about their experiences as this will add a consultative aspect to the research project.

This project has great potential and I foresee the research outcomes being very beneficial to the learning and teaching in the area of Indigenous Australian contribution to the mainstream Arts establishment. It is my understanding that this is a unique and interesting research topic and one which to my knowledge, has not been explored in this framework to date. It is a timely and relevant topic which should be studied. The outcomes of this project would provide another dimension to research in the field of Indigenous people working within the Arts Industry.

Liza-Mare is known to me as an Indigenous artist, theatre practitioner, educator and researcher. Her expertise in the field has enabled the opportunity for her to be invited to conduct guest lectures within our Centre Indigenous education programs. She possesses the skills, knowledge and passion to undertake this project successfully and I look forward to benefiting from this research both personally as a fellow Indigenous artist and film-maker and in my professional capacity as an educator and researcher of Indigenous Australian studies, particularly in the arena of Indigenous people working, developing and contributing to the growth of Creative Arts within Australia and internationally.

I wish her the very best in this endeavour.

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APPENDIX A

To whom it may concern

I Frederick Copperwaite Co-Chair of Moogahlin Theatre am writing to give my support to the research project, **"The Emergence of the Indigenous Actor in Australia: The Cultural, Social and Political influences on training"**, to be undertaken by Liza-Mare Syron as part of a Doctor of Arts research component at the University of Sydney.

I believe this project will contribute to a greater understanding of the way in which actor-training organisations in Australia engage with Indigenous student actors and performers. I support the inclusion of providing the opportunity for Indigenous graduates to speak about their experiences as this will add a consultative aspect to the research project.

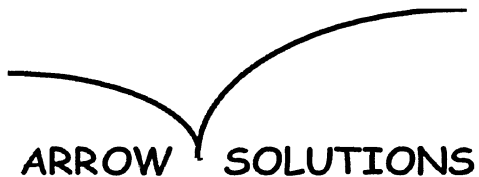
As an Indigenous theatre director I am always interested in engaging with trained Indigenous actors and learning about their process and development. I believe research into their experiences of actor-training would be most beneficial to me and others in gaining a deeper insight into their approach to work.

I currently hold the position of Co-Chair of Moogahlin Theatre with Liza-Mare Syron. I find her to be sensitive and thorough in her understanding of Indigenous theatre and performance and Indigenous issues in general.

I wish her all success with this project.

Frederick Copperwaite
Co-Chairperson
Moogahlin Theatre

APPENDIX A



475 Warrigal Range Road BROGO NSW 2550

Phone/Fax 02 6492 7225 email a.marshall@arrowsolutions.com.au

Dr Anne Marshall, Director

To whom it may concern

I have known Liza-Mare for some years, having met her while I was presenting the Keynote Address at the National Drama Australia (Drama in Education) Conference at NIDA and Liza-Mare was Chairing a Forum very closely related to her proposed Doctoral topic. I was for 18 years a Lecturer in the Faculty of Contemporary Arts and the Research and Postgraduate Studies Coordinator for Performance, during which time I supervised many dance and theatre research students and managed a team of supervisors. I subsequently spent 5 years as Coordinator of Aboriginal Studies including those subjects studied by teacher education students. I am now semi-retired and teach and research part time for the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre at Wollongong University

Since then, Liza Mare and I have kept in contact and discussed her research work on numerous occasions. Being two of a very small number of Indigenous academics in the field we share a concern about the scant inclusion of Indigenous people and perspectives in Australian Drama Education and the Theatre and Film industries.

Liza-Mare is more than capable of engaging in this research at a Doctoral level. She wholly engaged in negotiating the ...

social, cultural and political forces that have lead to the inclusion of Indigenous performance perspectives in secondary drama curricula in Australia ...

and has all the opportunities and contacts to produce an

overview of the tertiary actor-training sector to highlight the complexity of sites of engagement for Indigenous acting students and discuss the ways in which these institutions have engaged with Indigenous learners through pedagogical practices.

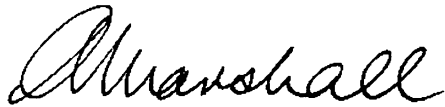
She proposes then to conduct a series of interviews with Indigenous actors to gain in depth information about their experiences to further clarify the situation:

Lastly I am interested in discovering the experiences of Indigenous actors who have navigated a variety of tertiary contexts in their training as an actor in order to create a space for their voices in the research outcomes.

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The procedure she proposes is appropriate and she will, as an Indigenous Researcher, well understand the protocols involved not only with the usual ethical interview and privacy procedures but also the particular protocols involved with interviewing Indigenous people.

I wish her well with her research and am available at any time for her to consult.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marshall". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter 'M' being particularly large and stylized.

Dr Anne Marshall

PhD, M. Litt, BA, Dip Ed, LTCL, AISTD, ASTC

Indigenous Social Ecologist

Lecturer and Researcher: Wollongong University (Indigenous and Cultural Studies)

Chair, SEAR (South East Arts Region Board)

Chair, Far South Coast Community College Inc

Member, Bundanon Indigenous Arts Reference Group

Member, AIATSIS



The University of Sydney

RESEARCH

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

John Woolley Building A20

University of Sydney NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA

Telephone: + 61 2 9351 6849 Facsimile: +61 2 9351 5676

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au Web: www.usyd.edu.au

ABN 15 211 513 464

TITLE: ACTOR-TRAINING IN AUSTRALIA AND THE INDIGENOUS STUDENT EXPERIENCE

I,..... give consent to my participation in the research project Name (please print)

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.
3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) now or in the future.
4. I understand that information about me will not be used in any way without my consent.
5. I understand that the information provided by me is to be used in the research paper.
6. I understand that this research may be used in publications for conferences and other research relevant to the subject.
7. I understand that should I not want my comments published in a public record I can at any time withdraw them by indicating such either in writing or by stating such in the interview.
8. I understand that should I not want to be identified in the research paper I can still contribute to the research and will be known as, 'research participant' or given a number. Also should I not want to be recorded I will indicate such during the course of the interview.
9. I give permission for my recorded Interview and transcripts to be archived at the University Of Sydney, Department of Performance Studies archive.
10. Should I not agree to any of the statements above I can cross them out. This will constitute that I do not give permission for that item statement.

Signed:.....

Date:.....



The University of Sydney

RESEARCH

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

FORM

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

John Woolley Building A20

University of Sydney NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA

Telephone: + 61 2 9351 6849 Facsimile: +61 2 9351 5676

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au Web: www.usyd.edu.au

ABN 15 211 513 464

TITLE: ACTOR-TRAINING IN AUSTRALIA AND THE INDIGENOUS STUDENT EXPERIENCE

(1) What is the study about?

The purpose of this research project is to firstly discuss the cultural, social, and political influences on the emergence of the contemporary Indigenous actor in Australia. This research will investigate the place of the institute in actor-training for Indigenous students and the experiences of these actor-training institutes from Indigenous graduates.

The aim of this research project is to provide a current overview of tertiary actor-training courses, including those that advertise Indigenous identified curriculums. This review will centre on the way in which these tertiary actor-training facilities engage with Indigenous acting students both pedagogically and methodologically.

Questions that arise for me in the field of Indigenous actor-training in Australia are; How have we arrived at the institutional model of training for Indigenous actors? Does it work for everyone? How much consultation has there been from Indigenous theatre practitioners on the relevance of actor training? In what way have we expected Indigenous acting students to fit into already established and dominant modes of performance practice? And do Indigenous actors acknowledge difference in practice?

I will investigate these questions by drawing on interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous acting teachers, acting institute management, and Indigenous acting graduates. This qualitative approach will provide voice to Indigenous actors who have graduated from these institutes so that their experiences and comments can contribute to an ongoing dialogue on Indigenous student experiences of actor-training institutes in Australia. I am interested in creating this dialogue as I believe that we have not taken the time to explore the complexities of Indigenous performance practice in Australia, nor the needs of the Indigenous actor.

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An outcome of this project will be to contribute to a greater pedagogical and methodological understanding of the way in which these facilities engage with Indigenous student actors and performers as well as also providing the opportunity for Indigenous graduates to speak about their experiences.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Liza-Mare Syron which will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Arts at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Laura Ginters and Ian Maxwell (Department of Performance Studies).

(3). What does the study involve?

This study will involve participants taking part in an interview. This interview will be conducted at a place and time at your convenience.

(4) How much time will the study take?

The estimated time of the interview will take no longer than one hour of your time.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to participate and if you do participate - you can withdraw at any time without prejudice or penalty.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?

A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report if requested. Interview tapes and transcripts will be stored at the University of Sydney, Department of Performance Studies Library for archival purposes. Should you not want your audio record or transcript held at the library please inform the researcher what you would like done with, or the conditions of archiving your interview material. Access to this material will be available from the Department of Performance Studies archive library on the number above.

(7) Will the study benefit me?

Your comments in this research project are intended to assist educational staff at Australian Actor-training facilities and Institutions, to better understand the history of the Australian Indigenous actor and their training needs. This is to address recent policy changes in Education that require all teachers and institutions to administer programs that are aimed at increasing, and encourage greater Indigenous involvement in higher education policy development. This new policy is aimed at improving outcomes for Indigenous people. This study seeks to address these policy issues in the context of

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Australian Acting Facilities/Institutions. Ultimately this study seeks to provide a better understanding of Australian Indigenous Actor-training needs.

(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes. Other potential participants are welcome to contact the researcher, Liza-Mare Syron on the number provided below.

(9) What if I require further information?

When you have read this information I will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact me on my mobile or email contacts below.

(10) What if I have a complaint or concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Senior Ethics Officer, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811 (Telephone); (02) 9351 6706 (Facsimile) or gbriody@usyd.edu.au (Email).

This information sheet is for you to keep

(m) 0410418496058 (e-mail) lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

GRADUATE TRANSCRIPT TABLES



The University of Sydney

1. OPENING QUESTIONS. 1-3

Graduates

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

Name	Actor trained
Benjamin Roy Graetz	National Institute of Dramatic Art
Leon Lennon Burchill	National Institute of Dramatic Art
Jadah Ruth Plieter (Milroy)	Victorian College of Arts
Andrea James	Victorian College of Arts
Lily Mae Shearer	University of Western Sydney
Frederick Vincent William Copperwaite	Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts
Maitland Ronald Roger Schnaars	Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts Aboriginal Theatre
Shakara Rose Walley	Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts Aboriginal Theatre
Carmen Maria Attel	Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts
Law Dallas Law	Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts/Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts
1.1 Where do you currently live?	
Benjamin Graetz	Sydney.
Leon Burchill	Right now, I live in Sydney.
Jadah Plieter (Milroy)	In Melbourne.

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Andrea James Coburg in Melbourne.

Lily Shearer Marrickville, NSW.

Frederick Copperwaite Glebe, NSW.

Maitland Schnaars Yoke in Perth. Western Australia

Shakara Walley In Perth.

Carmen Attel Brisbane.

Sydney.

Law Dallas Law

1.2 Where did you grow up?

Benjamin Graetz Darwin, Northern Territory.

Leon Burchill Far north Queensland. Near Cairns, but my family would say near the Daintree.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy) Padbury in Perth.

Andrea James Yorta Yorta country, north-east Victoria, Near Bodalla.

Lily Shearer

Brewarrina, NSW, and Glebe, Redfern and Penrith.

Frederick Copperwaite

Fremantle, and Perth. Western Australia.

Maitland Schnaars

Koolburra, a suburb of Perth and in Merredin, a small country town.

Shakara Walley

I grew up in Derby near Broome. Then I came down to Perth.

Carmen Attel

Maroochydore.

Law Dallas Law

I grew up in Queensland in a small town called Maryborough.

1.3 Can you tell me a little about your heritage?

Benjamin Graetz

My great grandmother is from Bardu Island, Torres Strait Islands. My grandfather is from Daly River, Mulluck Mulluck. My great grandfather is from Arnhem Land area. I am a bit of a mixture. Then Irish, and my dad is German heritage. I am German, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. My dad immigrated to the Barossa Valley in South Australia. My dad was born in Darwin as was my mum and that is where they met.

Leon Burchill

My heritage is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

I come from Palyku people in the Pilbara region. I was brought up down in Perth. My mother was stolen generation

and she grew up in a children's home. I have two brothers and two sisters. I come from a very artistic family. My aunt is a notable [sic] writer, my father was a musician, now he is a playwright and director and I grew up around all that. I moved to Melbourne in 1996 to study at the Victorian College of Arts

Andrea James

My dad's side is Yorta Yorta and my grandmother's country is Guni Kurni.

Lily Shearer

Mudawarri from Brewarrina, NSW.

Frederick Copperwaite

I identify as Aboriginal. My mother is a Bunuba from Kimberley region in north-west WA. Her mother was a Bunuba woman. Her father was a Timorese pearl diver. My father's family are of Irish descent.

Maitland Schnaars

On my dad's side, Nanny Nielson who passed away in 1966 and we think that she was 113 when she died. When she passed away, she lived on a mission just outside of Meriden. A white newspaper said, 'Grand Old Dame Dies'. Now in those days for a white paper to refer to a Noongar woman like that was quite amazing. She had a daughter and a son. I am from the daughter's side.

Shakara Walley

My mum's side, she's from the Kimberley. That means that my grandmother is from Halls Creek, and my grandfather is from Fitzroy Crossing. Bunuba and Jarru tribe. Then my dad is from Pinjarra up north and all that area.

Carmen Attel

I am Aboriginal, Gunerall people from Stradbroke Island. I also have relatives from NSW. There is also Scottish, Irish, Welsh, English, African American and South Sea Islands.

Law Dallas Law

I am from the Waka Waka nation in Queensland. I am a Murri.



The University of Sydney

2. INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS.

1-5

Graduates

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

2.1 Can you remember as a child what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Benjamin Graetz

I always wanted to perform and entertain. I had an older sister and younger sister. I think I wanted to be a doctor because I worked at St John's. In high school, I got into theatre and got a lot of lead roles. I was really a bit shy. I was a bit artsy. In senior college I did drama, but in years 11-12 I didn't think it was cool. Then my cousin did the Black Swan course in WA so when I finished I went and did the Michael Leslie course at WAAPA. It was the Aboriginal Musical Theatre. Now it is just theatre. I loved that it was musical theatre.

Leon Burchill

Oh yeah, really clearly. When I was seven, I wanted to be an actor. But I didn't know what to do or how to do it. I just knew that I wanted to be a voice. So there was always a passion there as a kid. Because I used to watch a lot of TV, I sat right in front of the TV, and I would wake up early just to watch TV. I was always interested in how people did it. I also think it was a gift passed down, probably through the ancestors, which is probably why I do it.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

I remember being asked in grade 5 and I said I wanted to be a jack-of-all-trades just like my father. I wanted to do a bit of everything.

Andrea James

Not really to be honest, no. I think I just wanted to be a secretary.

Lily Shearer

I wanted to be an actor

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Frederick Copperwaite

I had no idea. I think I wanted to be a fire fighter.

Maitland Schnaars

To be honest, a footballer. Aussie Rules. I started playing when I was six. I moved to Perth when I was sixteen to further my career. But, due to an injury, I became disenchanted with football and I decided not to return to it.

Shakara Walley

A ballet dancer. I wanted to be a dancer.

Carmen Attel

No, I don't remember, but someone told me once that I had said I wanted to be a vet and a week later I wanted to be an opera singer.

Law Dallas Law

When I was younger I think I wanted to be like every other kid. You know, be a fireman or a policeman. But then my father was a well-known boxer, he was an Australian champion. And so I looked more towards sports. I was a good tennis player. But I wanted to be like my father and be a boxer. As I got a little older, in high school, the arts drew me and I knew that I wanted to be a performer. I wanted to be a famous actor.

2.2 What made you decide to follow the profession you chose?

Benjamin Graetz

I think because I thought it was something I was good at. It felt right.

Leon Burchill

I wanted to be a voice for my people and Australia. Just to be heard. Because as a kid, I wanted a lot of attention and so used a lot of my imagination, that's how I created my own little world, and that's what actors do.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

I originally got into acting because I was very shy with little confidence. I didn't want to be humiliated or embarrassed in front of people so I thought, well that is what acting is all about getting up in front of people making a fool of yourself and that's a good way of getting over it. So, I started acting as a way of building up my self-

confidence and ability to be in the world. And it worked, so I kept doing it. It was one area of artistic endeavour that my family hadn't made a name for themselves in. So I thought I won't be in anyone's shadow. I love writing, and I love performing, and I wanted to be in *Star Trek*.

Andrea James

A couple of things. I really enjoyed it for one. We had a progressive drama teacher in high school, which did not last long but she taught us status games and played *Louisy Little Sixpence*. This was year 9 or 10. It blew me away and I learnt about my heritage through that drama class. I did not get anything from any other class like history or geography. I got an experience on the power of theatre to enable us to learn about this stuff. Not only that, but to put ourselves in other people's shoes. Like with the status games. It was a powerful experience at the time. I did become a secretary but later I moved to Melbourne to pursue theatre more. It took me a while to get into a course. Initially I wanted to do acting but got caught up in directing.

Lily Shearer

I just loved dancing and when I was young, I used to watch anything with dance on TV. I would always dance along to *Sesame Street*. I went to boarding school at twelve years old.

Frederick Copperwaite

When I was eighteen years old, I was studying to be a schoolteacher. Not that I wanted to be a schoolteacher, it was just something I was doing. I was asked to be in a play because I could sing a bit. I had never done that before, I was also very shy as a kid. Privately I was shy but publicly I was gregarious. The physical, visceral experience of being in the play and the effect turned me on to acting. It wasn't an intellectual thing, it was a physical thing. I didn't act on that for a number of years. I did other things but it was always in the back of my mind for a long time. Then at the age of twenty-three years, I started to explore the idea of being an actor. I wasn't sure how I was going to do that but I decided to explore it then.

Maitland Schnaars

I was twenty-four, studying the Aboriginal bridging course at Curtin University, and I was studying Psychology. My mentor, Peter O'Brian, saw a poem I wrote and said it was worth publishing. I then had a bit of a breakdown. When I came out of that, I started doing poetry performance and stuff like that. I stopped when I had kids. Then when I was

thirty-five, I was getting depressed again and I needed to stop that. Every night I used to check on my kids and I thought, how could I encourage my kids to follow their dreams when I have never gone for mine? I had to ask myself, what was my dream? So I thought I wanted to take my performance with my poetry a bit further. A friend came back from WAAPA with a pamphlet on the Aboriginal course there and then I thought that was it. This was in 2002. I enrolled in 2003.

Shakara Walley

To do the WAAPA course? I actually didn't want to do it. My mother pushed me into it because I was doing youth work at the time but I became really bored with it and she saw the course and she saw that it had dancing in it, so she thought it would be a good opportunity for me to do something. Instead of just sitting around at home.

Carmen Attel

I was doing a lot of other things sort of health related. However, I was performing in my spare time and decided I should get some training.

Law Dallas Law

When I was in high school, I missed out on performing in the end-of-year show. It was a musical. There were auditions in the middle of the year and I was too scared to audition. I knew that I could do it, but I never had the courage to. It wasn't until I saw the end-of-year performance that I knew I should have been there. Ever since then I decided to be a performer.

2.3 What made you decide to attend a formal training facility?

Benjamin Graetz

I think because of my cousin. I had heard of Michael Leslie. There was nothing in Darwin. I knew I had to leave Darwin to pursue acting. I went with a couple of friends of mine. They had a hostel where there was room and we paid \$70.00 a fortnight for student accommodation. The majority of teachers were non-Indigenous and Michael taught us dance. The course included Indigenous guests from Darwin who taught us Indigenous dances. Most of the non-Indigenous teachers were very supportive of Indigenous issues and understood where we came from. Wendy

Strehlow was our movement teacher and encouraged us to be who we were. She didn't teach just technique. I never felt I could not express what I needed to. At the end of the year, we put on a devised piece that we came up with.

Leon Burchill

The opportunity. Especially these days. My family, my relatives, my aunts and my uncles never had the opportunity back in the old days so when it came up I just took it. I got to meet a lot of really great people in the industry. When I left high school, I went to TAFE and I studied visual arts – this was in Cairns – and somehow I was always interested in performing arts and there was an opportunity to study in Melbourne. That was back in 1994. I applied and auditioned but that meant I had to leave Queensland and that was hard leaving home. But I took the chance and, like any artist, you take risks all the time. Through that, I learnt a lot. I also learnt to be away from home. I went to Swinburne University. The course was a Diploma of Theatre Arts in acting. It was an Aboriginal course and tied in with mainstream. I got to work with a lot of other students in the mainstream course. Which was really good because it was such a learning curve. Taught me a lot. I went back home then to Brisbane and I trained at the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts. One of my favourite actresses, Leah Purcell, now runs it.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

I had enrolled at a university, which had a completely different system, and I didn't feel much supported there. I didn't know where I was, or what I was doing, and I wasn't coping too well with it so I left. I then got a job in an Aboriginal art gallery and one of the guys there told me about an Aboriginal training course in Aboriginal music theatre that Michael Leslie was heading up with WAAPA and Black Swan Theatre. It was a six-month course, it was originally a three-month course that originated from *Bran Nue Dae*. So we both left that job and went to do that in 1994. I did that for two years. The aim of that course was a bridging course for Aboriginal people to give them the skills to audition for the mainstream courses and main schools. That was the aim of the course at that time. I auditioned for all the schools and I got into VCA. Initially I wanted to be a playwright and the only place that was offering that at the time was VCA. But when I auditioned I asked them about the playwrighting course and they said that course had been discontinued and they wanted me to do the acting course. They also told me about the theatre-making course they ran. It sounded a lot more in line with what I wanted to do, which was create my own work. But at that time it was only a postgraduate course. I wouldn't be able to do it unless I had a bachelor degree. So I did the

acting course and they allowed me to negotiate some of my classes and the expectations in that course so I was able to produce my own work at the same time rather than just acting in the productions they were putting on.

Andrea James

There was not anything else around. There was a bit of drunken singing around at home but nothing else. Formal study seemed to be a good option.

Lily Shearer

1980–1983 I was at the dance theatre in Redfern then I went to University of Western Sydney's Nepean campus in theatre performance and theory. It didn't teach me very much that I didn't already know. I got to know more in depth. In classes, I would challenge how everything related to Aboriginal performance.

Frederick Copperwaite

When I decided to be an actor, I wasn't sure how to do that. Because we came from a working class background there were no books around. My aunts played instruments so I was musical. But we weren't into going to the theatre or anything like that. I thought that I should learn how to do that. I re-enrolled in teachers college because I knew they had a theatre group. So I did about fifteen plays during that time. I had really supportive teachers who recognised that I probably would become a schoolteacher but they recognised that I could be an actor. They encouraged me to finish. Because I was doing this teacher-theatre arts thing I heard about NIDA. I went and auditioned for NIDA in Perth. I was in the top four. I didn't like the process; I found it brutal and humiliating. Not for me but for other people. I wasn't sure if I got in if I wanted to go or not. This was in 1983. I still wanted to train. I had done all these plays but I wasn't that sure about what I was doing. Someone put me on to VCA and WAAPA. WAAPA was very new. In 1984, I auditioned for VCA and WAAPA. I got into both schools. I wanted to get out of Perth. Then a mate said come and see the first graduation play at WAAPA. It knocked me out. It was very fresh. VCA and NIDA were older institutions and had a tradition about them. It appealed to me that WAAPA was only about three years old. So I went to WAAPA.

Maitland Schnaars

It is hard to explain. I knew I had to do this course. I knew I needed training to do what I wanted to do. I thought I was too old. But I wasn't.

Shakara Walley

Attend the course? Initially I only wanted to do it for the dance. I thought that I got in to do dancing and that will be it. But as I was doing [the course] I fell in love with acting. It just rubbed off on me. I kind of got bored with dancing because I'm the type of person who loves a challenge. If it gets too boring I just stop going. The course offers three elements of performing arts so there is dance, singing and acting. And it's pretty intense. Well, it was for me anyway.

Carmen Attel

I wanted more skills to know what I could do and could not do. I wanted skills for myself and so I could go out there in the community and see where it went. At the beginning, it was that I just wanted to try this. Because I made that choice, I have been able to give back.

Law Dallas Law

I don't think it was more of a decision. I was at the time working a nine-to-five job. Working very hard and it came down to frustration and knowing there was more out there and I knew I had to follow my heart. So I decided to do some training and I went to Eora then ACPA.

2.4 What facility/institute/college did you decide to attend?

Benjamin Graetz

For me the WAAPA course gave you the basic skills. It was a step into the industry. We auditioned for NIDA in Perth. I knew if I wanted to act, I needed to go to the best in Australia. NIDA's reputation was quite grand.

Leon Burchill

They ended up here in 2003. I didn't want to come to Sydney. But I knew I had to. I auditioned twice to get into NIDA. I nearly got in the first time and that was a kick in the guts but I came back the next year and tried again, and it was amazing. Because where I auditioned, I did a lot of my rehearsals in the same space at ACPA. So I felt really comfortable when I went to the audition. I knew the room so well. Then I got in. I knew it wasn't going to be easy from that moment on. I just wanted to learn more I guess.

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Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

VCA.

Andrea James

Victorian College of Arts

Lily Shearer

I knew NIDA was very competitive and I was living in Penrith at the time. I was a single mother of three and UWS was close to home. I also had a mortgage so I couldn't really travel that far. I had to work in the semester breaks. I got a grant from ATSLA to study. If I was on ABSTUDY I would never have been able to go. I also had a good support group around me who helped me with the kids if I had to perform or study at night.

Frederick Copperwaite

WAAPA because it was new and fresh. In hindsight, I liked the audition process as with VCA. It was professional yet respectful. NIDA put the wind up you.

Maitland Schnaars

I didn't know of any other course around.

Shakara Walley

Aboriginal Theatre course at WAAPA.

Carmen Attel

ACPA. I first heard about it from an article on my university noticeboard. I was at the University of Queensland studying applied health science in Indigenous primary health care. That was in 1998 and it was the first year of ACPA. I didn't do anything about it then but I thought it sounded cool. A friend of mine made it here before me and I came here in 2002, four years later.

I chose Eora because I wanted to do some training with other Aboriginal people in the community. I knew I would feel more comfortable as well. So I found out about Eora and joined up.
ACPA is an Aboriginal performing arts school and because I wanted to be closer to my people in Queensland. I wanted to be around family and a lot of my family live around Brisbane. I knew I would get on well with the students there because they were people from my area and there would be a couple of cousins there.

Law Dallas Law

2.5 What determined the institute/university/college you attended?

Benjamin Graetz

Because it had a reputation of being the best.

Leon Burchill

I didn't go to NIDA because of its name, I just want to keep in the craft. I want to learn more. It's great to have all those certificates and graduating from all of these places, but that's where I connected to the passion. It has always been about the passion.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

No response

Andrea James

It was accidental. I did a Bachelor in Arts majoring in Drama at Latrobe University. It was not a lot of practical; there was more theory. Then I worked in community for a while and in education. However, I still had the bug. I worked in Ballarat for a while and there was a youth group that wanted to put on a play. I enjoyed that experience and I thought I would like to have more skills in directing. They were doing that animating course which was more attractive to me than playing roles and doing Shakespeare, as that wasn't where my interests lay. The theatre-making course really gave me the freedom to work with whoever I wanted whenever I wanted. We did a combination of performing and writing.

Lily Shearer

No response

APPENDIX B

Frederick Copperwaite

No response

Maitland Schnaars

WAAPA is a highly regarded acting school in the country so I thought the course must be good.

Shakara Walley

I thought, why not give it a go. If I don't like it then I don't like it. I had nothing else to do so it was something to do.

Carmen Attel

I think after I spoke to people and heard things. I hadn't had a lot of previous training and it seemed like a place I could feel comfortable at. At university, most people have already done drama and music at high school or different places. It was about confidence. It sounded like a place where I could find what I was looking for.

Law Dallas Law

ACPA is an Aboriginal performing arts school and because I wanted to be closer to my people in Queensland. I wanted to be around family and a lot of my family live around Brisbane. I knew I would get on well with the students there because they were people from my area and there would be a couple of cousins there.



The University of Sydney

3. KEY QUESTIONS 1-12.

Graduates

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

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3.1 Can you tell me what the words 'actor training' mean to you?

Benjamin Graetz

In terms of acting as a profession, it trained you to be a professional actor.

Leon Burchill

I reckon it's about learning about yourself. It is like a puzzle, you get broken into pieces and then you put yourself back together again, mend yourself up and when you complete yourself, then you know your own style. Life is about learning, we are constantly learning, it is a learning process. That's how I see acting. To affect, you must be affected.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

When I hear those words I think of a very English tradition of becoming a thespian. It doesn't really resonate with me those words. Because of my experience in the acting training institution who seem imbued with all these other meanings and cultural terms of reference, they are very foreign to me. Training came to mean that it was a process, I guess assimilation is too much of a loaded term, but a process of being deconstructed and reconstructed into a particular model. With a set of expectations that were unclear and changing. I think actor-training is situated within a particular cultural context.

Andrea James

Shakespeare, voice classes. It is Western practices. I have had a bit of experience with Indigenous performers. When I graduated from VCA, I worked as a liaison officer to open up pathways for Indigenous artists to come and study at the college. Two actors went through while I was there. It was hard because it was competitive, and for blackfellas who are not that comfortable with putting themselves out there it was exclusive, cliquy and cut-throat.

This went against the way we do things with community and family. I have seen where colleges have incorporated Western practices with cultural practices without downgrading the need for discipline and skills. They seem to be more beneficial to blackfellas than the Strait actor-training that is around. Swinburne was set up to fail. There were some successes like Pauline Wyman, Leroy Parsons in the early days. Back then, it was a bit too loose and recruitment was loose. Then it moved to Prahran, which is white bread city. It was hard to get to. Most Aboriginal people lived in the northern suburbs. The funding was based on numbers and the coordinator was only employed for two days a week. It wasn't set up or run properly. The institution didn't support the programme with what it needed.

Lily Shearer

Voice exercises and warm ups. Warming the body up. Mentally warming the mind up. Being prepared to go on stage. Playing games.

Frederick Copperwaite

I don't think you can teach people to act. I think actor-training is about picking people with some potential. And that is subjective. There is a sense of presence on stage, voice, and physicality that some people have. It is a sense of acting. That sense is deepened by training and skills. Taking potential and giving it a deeper sense through technique and experience. You can't pick people off the street and teach them how to act. This has been confirmed for me recently when I took on someone in a play that wasn't trained in acting but I felt could act. You can enable that sense.

Maitland Schnaars

Skills based on how to create characters from both perspectives, both mental and emotional as well as physicality. Psychological and physical character.

Shakara Walley

Actor training, I was thinking of a really good answer for this. Well, with acting you use your voice and you use your body. Like a musical instrument. Like a guitar. So, I think it's perfecting it in a way, and it's building up to industry standards. You can be amateur or you can be professional, actor-training is just that learning how to teach. Like learning how to become a carpenter. Just giving you the tools basically. And sharpening them.

Carmen Attel

All the different skills that one uses as an actor. Music, dance, movement, voice, and character. Anything that you can use as an actor.

Law Dallas Law

Well, it is learning the basic acting skills that you need to learn to be an actor.

3.2 What were your expectations of the course you enrolled in?

Benjamin Graetz

I knew that it was going to be three years and a bit hard yakka. I was young, passionate, and ready to jump into it. I was ready to handle anything people threw at me. The expectation was that it would be tough. I knew it would be non-Indigenous. WAAPA had Indigenous content. I knew it was more about going into the real world. Looking at the industry there is not a big Indigenous presence. I wanted to change that. I am not a representation of all Indigenous people.

Leon Burchill

Recognition, not only for myself but for my people as well and Australia in general.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

My expectations were that the ability that I had within me, which I wasn't able to fully express or articulate, that those things could be found and brought out. I thought I would have the opportunity to have a voice. To find my voice. To have a safe space to explore what that is and to develop that, but that is not what happened.

Andrea James

I wanted to work with community. I wanted to explore my own heritage and I wanted to put that on stage. I wanted to work with other blackfellas. I think secretly everyone wants to be a star of stage but I was interested more in exploring my own stories.

Lily Shearer

It was that long ago. I was expecting they would be more up to date on other theatre cultures and especially Indigenous theatre. We did a little of it but it wasn't as in depth as I thought it would be. I practically taught my

class with Anne Marshall.

Frederick Copperwaite

None really.

Maitland Schnaars

I had none. I just knew I had to do it.

Shakara Walley

I thought it was going to be easy. Just because it was an Aboriginal theatre course. That, it wasn't. So that was my expectation of the course – that it would be easy. It was a lot of hard work. Having gone away from it I wish I had [gotten] more into it.

Carmen Attel

None really. I just wanted to experience it.

Law Dallas Law

I expected to learn about the basic acting skills. I also expected to learn about Aboriginal history in the performing arts. I also wanted to learn more about my culture and my people in general. Being an Indigenous performer it was important for me to learn my history, the Aboriginal history in performing arts. And the people who have gone before me. My role models. I believe that Indigenous storytelling and performance is a lot different to the so-called mainstream performing arts practice.

3.3 Did the training meet any of your expectations?

Benjamin Graetz

It was the hardest times of my life but from that, it exceeded my expectations. But when I got out it was a different story. We didn't get taught all the skills – like what happens if you don't get work. The expectations were that you were going to be a star and get lots of work. The reality was hard.

Leon Burchill

No and yes. Because I started off as a teenager training I was very stubborn and a lot of discipline is needed when you train. I rebelled a lot. I wanted to do things my way. But I had to let go and learn new tricks. Once I yielded to

everything they taught me, that's when I became really creative. That's when things got easier. Easier for other people to work with me. Want to let go, while obviously when you act you play with emotions, and that's another reason why I wanted to do acting, because I want to get all those emotions out. In Aboriginal culture that's what we do through music, dance and art.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

No. Not in any way. In a way, I was in a unique position as I managed to negotiate something. Because initially when they had invited me to come over as an actor, I said I don't want to do the acting course because I had heard about all of this. I wanted to do the theatre-making and they said, well it's discontinued at the moment and will be coming back in the following year as a bachelor degree, you can do a year of acting and if it is still 'that won't do', you can transfer over. So I went over there and after a year they made the theatre-making course a postgraduate course not a bachelor so I couldn't transfer over. So I used that to basically go back to them and say, listen I have moved over from the other side of the country to come here to do something that is actually not available to me.

I want to be able to work something out with you that are going to still meet your acting training requirements, so then I would do all the classes associated with the actor training, but instead of performing in your plays, I want to be able to write and produce my own. So in a way I developed my own training programme within the school. The downside of that was that I wasn't really assessed; no one really took responsibility for overseeing my programme or mentorship or development. Many felt I was in a too hard basket. I came out with a Bachelor of Dramatic Art in acting/theatre-making. In a way that was good as I am a very good self-learner and good at setting impossible stuff to do. I learned through that process. But I could have really benefited from having mentorship. It was something that was lacking in the system.

Andrea James

No response

Lily Shearer

Some did. Some didn't. I specialised in community theatre and community theatre making. I think I had one of the best teachers in Australia for that, Michael McLachlan; he exceeded all my expectations. He didn't just teach you

how to work in the community, he also taught you how to respect that community. How to work with other cultures in cross-cultural theatre. Cross-sexual theatre. It was empowering. He linked us to the practical side too. If he heard of a project, he would try to get us involved. I worked with him after I left UWS on a couple of projects.

Frederick Copperwaite

For me it was one of those moments in your life where I was exactly where I wanted to be and I loved it. It was difficult and challenging, and at times I was lost and confused, but I loved it. I loved that it was experiential and we never wrote a thing down on paper. There was no written assignment. I had always had trouble with formal learning; I didn't find it engaging. But here I learnt through my body, through our experiences. It wasn't thinking about it, it was doing it.

Maitland Schnaars

Yes, it was everything I thought it would be and more.

Shakara Walley

They did more. I didn't expect that there was so much into acting. It just brought me into a whole new element. It exceeded my expectations.

Carmen Attel

Yes and much more. I gained a better understanding of how all that worked in the industry. It gave me the ability to see where I could go in the arts. I was able to direct my learning toward what I wanted to learn.

Law Dallas Law

Yes it did. Both ACPA and Eora were similar in teaching performance skills and cultural subjects.

3.4 Can you tell me one positive experience you had during your training at acting school?

Benjamin Graetz

The people I got to know. You get close to the people you are there with. Although I don't keep that much in contact with them now, they will be there for you. A great connection with other students. I enjoyed the productions.

APPENDIX B

Leon Burchill

Of the three of them I would have to say the most positive, most memorable moments were the support from my peers. Being in a team, always looking out for each other; we all have different journeys but we are all on the same path when it comes to training.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

No response

Andrea James

I liked having the physical space to move around and try ideas. I did some theatre making with a group of first years and I really enjoyed that.

Lily Shearer

I learnt how to make and walk on stilts. I loved that. Be able to make a story for theatre in education. Collaborating with performance students. There were two strands – the theatre performance and theory. And the performance students, we also worked with other departments such as music and dance, which I found good because I like to work holistically across the art genres because we have been doing it for thousands of years. Just because it is called contemporary art doesn't make it new, it is just in a modern context.

Frederick Copperwaite

Text and plays. I had attitudes towards Chekhov and Noel Coward. We did *Uncle Vanya* as a graduation play and learnt through the teachers and the director to appreciate these types of texts. I learnt respect for these styles through doing it. Again, it was an experiential thing. I learnt about the experience of process, which I loved. There is no good or bad in process, just change and letting go. This was also a life lesson. That was positive. Also learning to breathe. I like the gentleness of that. I now meditate.

Maitland Schnaars

There were lots. Working with Lynnette Narkle in our end-of-year production. I was always scared about expressing my anger but I was given the opportunity to explore that more through character development.

Shakara Walley

Doing *Frankenstein*, which was our end-of-year play. We got to do it in the Enright Theatre with the lights and sound and everything. And just that whole experience for that whole week, being finally able to show off our

talents that each of us had and having an audience come and getting really good reviews for it.

Carmen Attel

Getting to work with some amazing people. The opportunity to work with different people. Self-confidence. I was so shy when I first started. My focus was music when I first came here but about some months in, I changed my major to dance until I hurt my back quite badly and changed to acting.

Law Dallas Law

At both Eora and ACPA one positive experience was getting to know there were other Indigenous performers out there who wanted to do the same as me and had the same ambitions. It was a great way of opening up and finding ways of telling stories about myself and also about my people as well.

3.5 Can you tell me one negative thing about your training at actor school?

Benjamin Graetz

While I was there or in reflection? Being given roles that I couldn't achieve. Being nineteen years old and playing a fifty-year-old. Failure wasn't encouraged at NIDA. There wasn't a lot of room for mistake. You are not taught how to manage failure.

Leon Burchill

Just chucking tantrums, I guess. I was throwing tantrums with teachers, with my peers. It was the level of expectation and things always had to be done at a certain time. I wanted to do things in my time. So that caused conflict. So I rebelled. It had a lot to do with my pride, and my ego. Look, it's something that every actor has to have to protect you, but then you have to know how to control it. You are an open book when you're an actor. Everybody wants to know about you, that comes with the job. You know what? I hate talking about myself. But I got so used to doing it, you just go, well whatever.

Jadah Pieter (Mirov)

No Response

Andrea James

There were a lot. There was no support for Indigenous students at all. You hear stories of a lot of Indigenous students who failed but not a lot about the successes. At one time, there was a whole bunch of Maori people who came over for an exchange and the whole school embraced them, sang their songs, and danced. This made me sad we couldn't do that sort of thing in our school. They taught all the boys the Haka but hadn't acknowledged the land they were on. They never acknowledged that they were stomping on the Kulin nation and I found that offensive. I wrote a letter to the director of the college and after that we got some Indigenous theatre makers in and tried to redress that. That was when they created the liaison person and got to assist Indigenous students coming to the college, and teach staff about Indigenous protocols. Andrea Hull was the director at the time and worked closely with Michelle Evans to open the Wilin Centre.

Lily Shearer

The patronising attitude of my classmates. When I asked a question, and just because they knew more about Western theatre than I did, which I related to my own cultural experience, well the students didn't like me asking those types of questions or the manner in which I tried to understand Western methods of theatre through my understanding of Indigenous theatre practice. Also the lack of recognition that we came and grew up with cultural performance knowledge. This is who we are. We are storytellers, we are performers, and [them] not taking that into account.

Frederick Copperwaite

Learning that the people who teach you are just the same as you. Sometimes I felt there existed an envy and rivalry between students and teachers. I felt the teachers sometimes didn't always encourage students, and I felt there was a sense that teachers felt threatened by some talented students.

Maitland Schnaars

Singing lessons. Everyone seemed to have an aptitude for singing whilst I do not. I don't even sing in the shower. My comfortable voice range was very low and my teacher had to stop me from performing with the group because we didn't have a lot of time. Because of the [lack of] time and the number of students, I missed out on developing my singing voice.

Shakara Walley

With my class, especially last year, we had a lot of people dropping out, and there were supposed to be twelve people, we ended up with five. There was a lot of people coming in and dropping out at the last minute and [that] affected the work a lot because you weren't able to do as much as you want to. You always have to wait for the other person to come in, or not do the work because that person wasn't there. It kind of lacked in that area, you know, people not showing up.

Carmen Attel

Sometimes because the college is so small, sometimes you couldn't do group work because people had a lot of things going on. Working on my own wasn't as good as working with a group.

Law Dallas Law

There were no negatives, to be honest. Maybe some misunderstandings. At ACPA mainly, there was a lot of non-Indigenous teachers there. I found there was quite a bit of conflict there because I didn't believe that the teachers had enough knowledge about Aboriginal people or protocols. There were a lot of communication breakdowns sometimes.

3.6 What type of roles do you think your training prepared you for?

Benjamin Graetz

While I was there or in reflection? Being given roles that I couldn't achieve. Being nineteen years old and playing a fifty-year-old.

Leon Burchill

With characters? I could say stereotyped roles, but always right through my training I wanted not to play those roles. I didn't want to be the 'token' blackfella. It's good that other people were quick to see that change, [and] that I can change. You have to break barriers.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

It depends on what you class as a professional career. Further professional career that they were trying to train us up to was not the career that I was looking for. Or interested in acting in. I wasn't really interested in being in a Weet-Bix ad, going on television in *Blue Heelers* or that kind of thing. I was interested in creating my own work and

working with companies that would allow that. Working with community groups and developing work. So I don't know that the training itself intended to prepare me for that.

Andrea James

I think because the theatre making course was about making something out of nothing it taught you to be resourceful and work with other people. I had to find out myself about community consultation, as there wasn't a lot of that talked about. The skills stuff was lacking.

Lily Shearer

Mainstream roles. Run-of-the-mill white Australian roles, classical, conventional.

Frederick Copperwaite

For anything. I can do anything. You played a number of different things at school.

Maitland Schnaars

All sorts of roles. After graduating, I enrolled in the contemporary performance course at SOCA – School of Communication and Arts at Edith Cowan. I chose that course because I wanted to create my own pieces. Other institutions make brilliant puppets for other people to manipulate. I wanted to look at developing my own work as well.

Shakara Walley

No response

Carmen Attrel

Most of the training was focused on character. We spoke about culture and history. We looked at different characters as who they were whether they were Indigenous or not.

Law Dallas Law

It gave me acting skills and writing skills and creative skills to put myself out there after I graduated. Both ACPA and Eora taught me many things and many different ways in the performing arts. Eora was more acting and cultural skills and business skills. At ACPA it was more singing and dancing and musical skills.

3.7 What type of roles have you played since graduating?

Benjamin Graetz

I played Romeo in Wesley Enoch's *Romeo and Juliet* for Bell Shakespeare with Wayne Blaire and Laurence Clifford. I did a Chekhov and then I went to Townsville to do a play about Indigenous issues but I didn't play an Indigenous role.

Leon Burchill

I've done five films this year. I played the blackfella in *Back Home*, I played myself for the first time which was actually good because I got to speak in my own native tongue. That was a learning curve. Also this year I did some work for Legal Aid; I did a short film with them playing a prisoner. So I had to go Long Bay jail and film there. That was scary. My latest film is called *Tribe* which is the black version of *Dynasty*. That was with Lillian Crombie and Arthur Beatson, I didn't know he could act. That was with SBS, it should be out next year. It's about the richest people in Australia and they are black and they run the country. There is another feature called *Last Kiss Cry*; we did that here in Redfern. I've been busy. In the film where I got to speak my own language, back home, well my relatives have never seen me act before. They knew what I did down south but they hadn't seen me do it. So they got to see my craft and me. Words cannot explain how good that felt. To see how proud they were of me.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

All over the shop. I have worked predominantly as a playwright. In Melbourne, Tasmania, Brisbane and have been [on] a number of writers tours. I've worked as a director, as a theatre maker, I have run some courses at Swinburne University and with the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts. I have worked as an artistic director, as an amateur, as a dramaturge, as an events concepts person. I was also involved in doing content for a TV series as well.

Andrea James

No response

Lily Shearer

Colour casting roles. My first role was as a drunken coloured woman from the pub, a mail order bride. I had more fun at school at St Scholastica [playing Jesus]. I could pass as anything not just a blackfella.

APPENDIX B

Frederick Copperwaite

When I went into acting school, I came in with an Italian heritage. My stepfather was Italian. I identified as an Italian Australian at school. So, when I graduated it was the first time I experienced racism in the industry. The casting people and the industry placed that label on me. In acting school they were colour blind. When I graduated, I worked a lot but always as a foreigner. I spoke with accents and I was always the other. In over twenty-five roles in TV, I used my natural voice once. It was a good and interesting role but my Australian heritage was ignored. It is a political issue.

Maitland Schnaars

No response

Shakara Walley

Well, from my experience because this year I have been working, I would have got a lot of cultural awareness roles. But I think we varied in our training in my year. We did a lot of Indigenous plays, we did non-Indigenous plays. So with the characters it varied a lot, for my class anyway.

Carmen Attel

All sorts. I played mothers, daughters, women, Indigenous roles and non-Indigenous.

Law Dallas Law

I have been out there doing theatre productions. Written my own work and directed others work as well.

3:8 What type of skills did you learn?

Benjamin Graetz

Voice, movement, acting techniques, musical theatre, history of theatre and general studies. In the grand scheme of things, the history of theatre didn't include Indigenous theatre. In general studies, there was a small amount. At the end of first year, we put on an Australian play but there were no Indigenous plays explored.

Leon Burchill

Voice, even though I hated it but the most important for me. Movement, music – lucky for me my father's side of the family are musicians. Language like Shakespeare. How to express in words, use words.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

At VCA there was no theory behind the curriculum content. I mean, there is a theoretical basis where you study the philosophy of acting, where it comes from, the different disciplines and the different methods. We had a dean that had developed their own methodology and they taught us that. So we did a lot of process-based work, we worked with an organic, group devised processes. That's the stuff I got the most out of, the group's stuff. Some of the techniques that were taught were specific to the dean's processes. Some of it was helpful but some of it just wasn't. If you didn't respond well to that process [we did not] even have anything left that you could try because that was all that was on offer.

Andrea James

Broad ranging theatre making skills. I am a bit vague on the theory. I tend to magpie a bit. A bit of everything. Watching other people's work was inspiring.

Lily Shearer

Confidence in public speaking, developing community theatre in cross-cultural contexts and interdisciplinary work. In the first year, we were with the performance students. We did voice in performance, body in performance. We did Greek theatre and classics, production skills like lighting and sound.

Frederick Copperwaite

There wasn't a particular style of acting promoted like practical aesthetics or method. We were not allowed to read any books about acting. It was all in our experience. I learnt how to be more aware of myself. A kinaesthetic awareness. Being in the moment and finding time to adjust in performance. But I am not sure if I actually learnt anything though. I am still the same actor.

Maitland Schnaars

Vocal, physical, how to create characters from the script, the Stanislavski method. I like to create characters from the physical not psychological.

Shakara Walley

No response

Carmen Attel

No response

Law Dallas Law

Acting, writing, directing and now learning the business side of putting a show together.

3.9 Have these skills been useful in your professional life?

Benjamin Graetz

Definitely. They give you a great confidence. Helped me in my life in being a more open and confident person.

Leon Burchill

Definitely. Education has an expectation; people always want to know what you've done. Some actors are not trained, they're just people in the right place at the right moment. I went the hard yards, which is okay, everybody works differently, but for me it was better to learn more before becoming professional. So I can use that in my toolbox and everything I do now.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

Yes. Some of the more abstract ideas and concepts of ways of working were helpful to me. I did get a toolkit and I was very selective, I knew what I was looking for and the way in. It was mostly the processes and ways of working that [are] really useful.

Andrea James

Yes and no. There is nothing like work experience.

Lily Shearer

My word yes. Although I am not an expert in any of those fields, I know I can't put a show on without people who are skilled in those areas of theatre performance and production. Especially a good project manager.

Frederick Copperwaite

Yes. You can detect people who haven't trained. It is the technique of finding a deeper level in the process.

Maitland Schnaars

Yes.

APPENDIX B

Shakara Walley
No response

Carmen Attel
Yes.

Law Dallas Law
Yes.

3.10 Was there any aspect of Indigenous performance culture provided with your training?

Benjamin Graetz
No.

Leon Burchill
Of course our culture is such a beautiful culture, such a strong culture. A lot of blackfellas say we are a natural performers because it's been passed down from generation to generation. Having a solid heritage shows the world what we can do. Always, it is there for me, and also the environment, because that's who I am. As much as I try to avoid it a lot of times you just can't, it is part of you. You just have to accept that it is how I get things done.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)
No.

Andrea James
There was a little bit of theory in critical studies. A couple of Indigenous artists were invited to come and speak. It wasn't in the curriculum.

Lily Shearer
Yes, we did one subject of Aboriginal Performance and Anthropology. We learnt all about the Northern Territory people. None about NSW. There was none of our dances.

Frederick Copperwaite
No. At that time there wasn't the Aboriginal theatre course. I have been told I was the first Aboriginal actor to come out of the academy. I don't feel comfortable with that because, in my opinion, Garry Cooper was the first, and that was in 1989.

Maitland Schnaars

Yes.

Shakara Walley

Pardon? You mean about learning about Aboriginal culture in the course? Well, we did Indigenous plays by Jack Davis so we did a lot of research on the era and historical research. With Simon Stewart, our dance teacher, he incorporated a lot of animal movements with the identities, so like the Indigenous animal dances. I remember sitting down for about a week and we discussed our Aboriginality kind of thing. We were talking about everything from spirituality to now to back in the olden days but we discussed it. They set a whole week aside where we just talked about our different stuff so from that we made up a spiritual dance, a cultural dance.

Carmen Attel

Yes.

Law Dallas Law

Yes, there was at both schools.

3.11 If no, do you think it should have been provided?

Benjamin Graetz

I think more of a background knowledge and understanding of it. Like the plays and playwrights as well as in the context of the industry. I wasn't there to study Indigenous skills but I would have liked to know who was out there and what they were doing. More theoretical than practical knowledge.

Leon Burchill

Definitely. Because not only because I am an Indigenous person, it teaches other people about other cultures, about the first Australians and that is very important.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

That's a difficult question. You don't want it to be token either. A lot of my experiences with anything Indigenous in

a non-Indigenous institution are that if you are an Indigenous person you've got all the questions. Like, why are we doing this? You get all that stuff. Which I have had at times and that places the Aboriginal students in a horrible position. What started to happen at VCA is that we have an Aboriginal liaison officer, which developed into an Indigenous unit and became a centre for Indigenous education, the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Cultural Development. I worked there, I should know.

They have been working on their curricula across all the schools and working with each school to develop that. They have an on-campus and general Indigenous arts program that runs events that are accessible to all of the schools but not necessarily a unit that you study within your course. I think that's a better way of going about it. I think there should have been more options in text work or what you could choose to work on. That has sort of happened but certainly wouldn't be doing an Indigenous play because you don't have Indigenous people to play the roles.

Andrea James

Yes. It is difficult for a place like Melbourne to know what to offer. But there is a way to invite people in to discuss their practice.

Lily Shearer

It was all about the Inma dreaming of the Pitjantjatjara people. It wasn't very useful to me. Maybe to the non-Aboriginal people. It was all about sorry business. It is not my culture and I shouldn't be delving into others' sacred stuff.

Frederick Copperwaite

I guess only in the sense that there be an awareness of Aboriginal theatre. I always felt that the interesting Australian plays were the ones that explored the tension between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The mixed cast creates a great tension. The all-white plays or the all-black plays somehow miss that tension. It could have been interesting because although we looked at Australian plays we didn't include Aboriginal plays in that. David Williamson, and Alex Buzo.. The director of WAAPA did discuss the Black Theatre in Redfern but in an informal way.

Maitland Schnaars

No response.

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Shakara Walley
No, well I don't know. No, I don't think so.

Carmen Attel
No response.

Law Dallas Law
No response.

3.12 If yes, what type of Indigenous performance culture was delivered?

Benjamin Graetz
No response.

Leon Burchill
No response.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)
No response.

Andrea James
There are a lot of non-Indigenous performers working with Indigenous people in the industry and I think that they should get a good grounding of protocols before they go out and work with individuals and with communities.

Lily Shearer
No response.

Frederick Copperwaite
No response.

Maitland Schnaars
Many of the plays we looked at were Indigenous plays. When I was doing it, there was this elder who was supposed to come down from a community and teach us some song lines but something happened in the community and he couldn't come down. We got to know people in the Industry like Yirra Yakin and Davis Milroy. Rick keeps you in

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the loop.

Shakara Walley

No response.

Carmen Attel

We often had people come in for traditional dance. We had elders come in and tell stories. The history of Black Theatre. There were specific units where we looked at Indigenous culture in theatre and outside Western theatre.

Law Dallas Law

On a daily basis we were reminded of our heritage and performance history. It is very important because when we go out there in the mainstream world we are going to be telling our stories from our culture and our people and experiences. I would still like to be mainstream but with a twist. You know, tell it from my own heritage and from my own people.



The University of Sydney

4. FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS. 1-4

Graduates

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

4.1 Have you been working in your trained profession since graduating?

Benjamin Graetz

I worked for three years and then worked for Qantas. Now I am back there and doing the movement course. Not much has changed here. There are a lot more people that are indigenous on Television. I am working freelance in movement, acting, directing.

Leon Burchill

No response

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

I was an artistic director of a theatre company but now I work in community arts. I work with Koori visual artists. I want to visit my grandmother's country. I am 'walking in'.

Andrea James

No response

Lily Shearer

No response

Frederick Copperwaite

Yes, for about fifteen years. TV, film, theatre and community theatre. My agent died in 2001, David Bruister. I did my apprenticeship for fifteen years. I see myself now as an artist, acting, directing, teaching and producing. Playing the role became limiting and self-obsessive. I like to now create opportunities for younger people.

Maitland Schnaars

No response

Shakara Walley

I have had three jobs so far. The first job with the Department of Education and Training and that was the day shoot for communication with the elderly – cultural awareness. My second job was with WBMC. I have no idea what that stands for. I did cultural awareness things. I think that was for domestic violence up in the Kimberley. These were DVDs. And then I did a three months' tour with Yirra Yaakin Aboriginal theatre. That was a children's play. That was four Noongar dreamtime stories and then going out into primary schools and showing the kids. We did five weeks metro and three weeks regional. It was a lot of hard work that was good.

Carmen Attel

I am the curriculum coordinator at ACPA.

Law Dallas Law

I am currently performing and writing. I am looking always for more performances. I am currently directing a show.

4.2 Of all the information you so generously shared with this research project, what do you think is of most importance to the training of Indigenous actors?

Benjamin Graetz

I would have to go back to the Michael Leslie discipline. We are entering an industry that is very well established. We have to be part of the industry in order to change it. A big part of that industry is discipline.

Leon Burchill

We need a strong sense of ourselves, and a belief in ourselves. Indigenous people are innately beautiful and we need to be able to express that in that industry. Don't worry about pleasing others, worry about pleasing yourself. That is art.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

Not really. I am excited for the idea of the National Indigenous Theatre company. I am amazed that people have survived as performers, as there doesn't seem to be a lot of support out there for Indigenous theatre companies. Blackfellas don't go to the theatre but they will get involved when you go to their communities and support the telling of their stories and what is relevant for them.

Andrea James

No response

Lily Shearer

No response

Frederick Copperwaite

When I did a show with two Aboriginal girls, we did an interview for the ABC and the interviewer kept referring to 'Aboriginal actors', 'Aboriginal plays' and such. I said it is an Indigenous story and Indigenous actors are telling the story. But we still need to look at them as actors. They are capable of not only telling their own story but also being able to play anything. They are Australian actors. I think it is important to not only be a voice for your people or community but also to focus on your individual process. It is hard though because of the conservative nature of the industry and its need to pigeonhole people. When an Aboriginal actor recently played Othello people said that it was groundbreaking. I am not talking about his performance but getting an Aboriginal person to play Othello. Well, it is not groundbreaking because Othello is black. What would be more groundbreaking would be to have a black Hamlet or black Lady Macbeth. In England a few years ago there was uproar because a black woman played Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. We play in two worlds; as much as we want to reflect our own stories, there is other work out there. It is about a creative process, not about acceptance. It is about breaking the conservativeness of the whiteness that governs our profession. There is a cultural agreement before casting even starts. I am passionate about challenging those agreements.

Maitland Schmaars

No response

Shakara Walley

I think what Rick [Brayford] is doing here is really, really good for the people who want to do acting as a career and they just need a little bit of a boost. Or even to have the opportunity to test out if they want to do acting. This is a really, really good place to be. And Rick is one of those people who will help you. Like, I have finished but I still feel like this place is a second home. You can still come back and talk to him and he will give you advice.

Carmen Attel

Culture is important. Knowing your history. I know that depending on where you are from is different and that is a problem for a standardised curriculum. But it should be of equal weight to your skills. The opportunity should be there to seek out your particular culture and how you would use that in your training. How you use your skills and culture together in the work you do is important whether that is in the community or in theatres.

Law Dallas Law

The most important thing is to be out there and not be afraid to tell your stories. To share what you have written and performed.

4.3 If you could change any aspect of your actor-training experience, what would it be?

Benjamin Graetz

That expectation of the reality of the industry to prepare you more for the industry. Maybe knowledge of the Indigenous theatre out there. How to put on your own theatre. Practicalities of surviving in the industry.

Leon Burchill

That is a tricky question. More time to create and fewer limitations. Not so many deadlines. No artist is ever satisfied, it's like a painting and it is never finished. But going through three acting schools is enough acting training for me.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

Have Indigenous content and at the very least discuss issues of protocols. People still think that Indigenous stuff only happens in remote areas of Australia. They don't know that they are here or next door. We create performance through ritual and the protocols are important.

Andrea James

I think the main issue I had with the school was that it felt like a continual audition. Once you are in that didn't mean that you were going to graduate. So there was always this threat of failure. This meant that you were never actually free to fail, to let go and take risks. Or to feel supported in your learning environment. It creates an atmosphere of suspicion and fear and unhealthy competition. Further, as I say, one of the things I really missed during that time was relationships with my teachers. Like mentorship which is very different from the student-teacher relationship.

Because mentorship can only exist based on trust and reciprocity where you know that you're both working together for the same goal, not that they're judging you continually. You don't have to feel like you have to show them something they want or else you get the chop. That relational dynamic is what I would change if I could.

Lily Shearer

More practical hands on stuff. Not everyone is theoretical minded. More projects that you write about. More traditional Indigenous performance practices from local areas in NSW. We haven't lost culture here in NSW. Culture is an evolving process; our culture evolves, our dreaming changes and we keep culture alive in this way.

Frederick Copperwaite

I would make room in the course to include different forms of performance. There is this elite model in acting schools. They take twenty-five people out of two thousand. You are being trained primarily for mainstream work. The reality is that only a few people end up there or want to end up there. Many people start acting school thinking they will do mainstream but find out they don't and want to do something different. It was plays in mainstream format. I think it could facilitate other ways of working.

Maitland Schnaars

No response

Shakara W alley

No response

Carmen Attel

I think I would do more integrated physical theatre. We had some but maybe more music theatre. If I could wave a magic wand I would solve everyone's social and interpersonal issues that prevent people's learning experience.

Law Dallas Law

At ACPA and at Eora we did learn some stuff about the business side, like going out there and putting on your own show. I really believe we need to have more time and learn more about the business side. Getting out there and going to agents, going to see people, and writing funding applications.

4.4 If you were in charge, what changes would you make to the training?

Benjamin Graetz

I would make sure that there would be more on what is expected out there in the industry. More about co-ops and how to do your own theatre, or community theatre. For me it is about having a voice so more on the practicalities of doing that.

Leon Burchill

If I was in charge of NIDA? I would make things a lot more flexible. You know, when you tell people that you've been through NIDA and all the other acting schools they look at you different. The reactions make you feel proud. So no, I don't think I'd change anything. I still dance, and paint. When I do these things I am connected to my culture. When I play a role my connection is through the experiences of that character.

Jadah Plieter (Milroy)

Acknowledging local Indigenous people and place. Learning and sharing cultural differences

Andrea James

I would make everybody create their own work. As well as perform other people's. I would make them study a wide range of text, a wider range of acting methods rather than being narrowed. I would take an approach that basically would go, once you've accepted someone you are responsible to support the development of that person's potential in the direction they wanted to go. Then this becomes a partnership working with that person to achieve that, rather than accepting someone and then saying they must conform to what you believe is acting, and we going are going to teach you how to do that and you need to submit to that process.

Lily Shearer

A lot more cross-cultural stuff. White Australia is not the dominant people in Australia anymore. I would have liked the opportunity to know more about other cultures and their performance practices.

Frederick Copperwaite

No response

Maitland Schnaars

They are changing it now with the film work. When we did our end-of-year piece, we did it in a small studio off

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campus. Now they get to perform in the new theatres on campus. So there are changes all the time anyway. It is more integrated into WAAPA than when I went.

Shakara Walley

No response

Carmen Attel

The course is different to when I went through and there has been more development of the curriculum. More flexibility in streaming your electives earlier. A better building. More staff.

Law Dallas Law

If I could I would find more money for both courses. I would try to bring more money into the courses so we can have better equipment, better props and better staging for productions. Better venues to perform in. I think the money situation is quite tight.

TRAINER TRANSCRIPT TABLES



The University of Sydney

1. OPENING QUESTIONS. 1-4

Trainers

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

Name	Institute
Lynnette Francis Williams	National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA)
Rick Brayford	Western Australian Academy Performing Arts (WAAPA) (Aboriginal Theatre)
Richard David Murphett	Victorian College of Arts (VCA)
Pennelope Mullen	Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA)
Kevin Jackson	National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA)
John Clarke	National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA)
Julie Warne	Western Australian Academy Performing Arts (WAAPA)
Nicolas Hugh Mark Hills	Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA)
Darryl James Griffen	Eora College of Aboriginal Studies, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts

1.1 Where do you live?

Lynnette Williams Little Bay, Sydney, NSW.

Rick Brayford Perth, WA.

Richard Murphett Melbourne, Victoria.

Penelope Mullen I live in Brisbane, Queensland.

Kevin Jackson Randwick in Sydney, NSW.

John Clarke Paddington, Sydney, NSW.

Julie Warne No response.

Nicolas Hills I live in Brisbane.

Darryl Griffen Springwood in the Blue Mountains.

1.2 Where did you grow up?

Lynnette Williams Wollongong, NSW.

Rick Brayford I grew up in Kellerberrin near Kalgoorlie.

Richard Murphett No response.

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Pennelope Mullen
In Sydney, NSW.

Kevin Jackson
Around this area (Randwick). I went to Catholic schools in the area.

John Clarke
I come from Tasmania.

Julie Warne
No response

Nicolas Hills
I was born in New Zealand and just before I was seven we moved to England. I was brought up in England.

Darryl Griffen
I grew up in Gunnedah, north-western NSW.

1.3 Can you tell me a little about your heritage?

Lynnette Williams
No response

Rick Brayford
My mum is a single mum and she did it tough out there. But I think what happened, like why I'm doing what I'm doing I didn't choose this, I did not choose to do what I'm doing, very lucky I didn't choose it. I think what happened was that when Mum was doing it really tough and things were scarce and she was pretty ostracised by the local white community. And Mum tends to think that all the wives thought she was going to steal the men. And then what happened was I noticed things all of a sudden a bit like a stew left on the front porch. It was the mob. And then you know it's been so funny because I went to Armadale; we went there with the other stepfather to the southern suburbs.

Richard Murphett
Welsh, Danish, British and French.

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Pennelope Mullen I am non-Indigenous. I am Italian, Scottish and Australian. I have been connected to Indigenous people all my life through family connections even though my family aren't Indigenous. I have been around Indigenous people all my life.

Kevin Jackson Anglo-Saxon, Irish and English heritage. My mother was on the First Fleet. Mum's side was Irish. I don't know that much about my dad.

John Clarke No response.

Julie Warne No response.

Nicolas Hills New Zealand and English.

Darryl Griffen I grew up in Gunnedah, north-western NSW.

1.4 Where do you currently work?

Lynnette Williams NIDA, in Sydney.

Rick Brayford At WAAPA, Edith Cowan University, Perth

Richard Murphett The Victorian College of Arts, University of Melbourne.

Pennelope Mullen At the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA).

Kevin Jackson At the National Institute of Dramatic Art, the Actors Centre, the Australian Opera and classes with graduates in the evening in my own time.

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John Clarke	No response.
Julie Warne	WAAPA, Edith Cowan University, Perth.
Nicolas Hills	At the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA).
Darryl Griffen	Eora College of Aboriginal Education, Centre for Visual and Performing Arts. Sydney Institute, TAFE NSW.



The University of Sydney

2. INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS 1-6.

Trainers

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

2.1 Can you remember as a child what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Lynnette Williams	I always wanted to be a schoolteacher and I think that was my parents' dream. There was always a part of me who wanted to perform. I played piano and sang but I never felt confident enough to follow that through. So I went down the academic route as I was quite good at it and so I became a teacher.
Rick Brayford	I floundered around. I was working in a factory making furniture. Then I got into radio. Well, I got into DJ-ing so I was a nightclub jock, it was good money. Then I went up to Kalgoorlie as the DJ working in a skating rink. I was a skater, I used to do figure skating. And that got me to teach skating and that was great. Then I got a job at the radio station and that was my first connection with either or drama because I started writing radio plays and making radio productions.
Richard Murphett	A journalist. I didn't think that way. I liked a laugh and found myself in this profession. I was never one of those people who wanted to be an actor.
Penelope Mullen	A dancer.
Kevin Jackson	I wanted to be an actor and a teacher. At school, you had vocational guidance in those days and my mother said I should have a trade so I became a butcher. Some people still think I am a butcher.
John Clarke	No response.

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Julie Warne

No response.

Nicolas Hills

A dreamer. My father was a vicar and we lived in Pararura. It was a fairly rough area. A new estate. There was a hill up the back of the estate and me and my friend Martin used to go up there and just sit and watch the clouds. I thought that was a great way to spend my time and from there becoming an artist was a natural progression.

Darryl Griffen

Alive. I didn't have any idea. I grew up wanting to be a doctor. When I got to year 11 I think it was about that time that I wanted to be a PE teacher. Newcastle Uni had a really good physical education program. I went along and applied. There were a couple of other guys there too and one had the marks to be a doctor, but he wanted to be a PE teacher. I tried to convince him to be a doctor, but he got the scholarship.

I decided to do year 12 again and got a scholarship to Armidale University to study primary school teaching, majoring in physical education. I was told that I could upgrade to high school teaching later, which I didn't.

2.2 What made you decide to follow the profession you chose?

Lynnette Williams

Well, I taught for a while. My first teaching appointment was out west in Miller. I worked in physical education and movement and I started to enter the kids in dance competitions and gymnastics. It was clear that my heart was in music and dance. Then someone in the secondary sector who invited me to work there visited me and I said yes. Wollahby Girls High School and I did the dance stuff and gymnastic competitions.

I then met a man and we bought some land down at Wollongong. A job came up at SCEGGS down there and I taught there. During that time the Conservatorium of Music opened a branch in Wollongong and a girlfriend of mine said, "why don't we audition." They recommended we audition at Sydney. I got in and did a second degree in music. I then had a professional career as a singer in music theatre. From there I wrote a course for Creative Arts at Wollongong University and lectured there for a while. I also had a music theatre company in Wollongong. We went overseas for a holiday and we met some people who suggested we go back over there and

work. So we did. I got involved in arts administration and supported myself whilst writing my opera libretto. I had a wonderful time and set up an agency for entertainment and culture. The last job I had was the director of ceremonies, culture and education at the London Olympic Games.

Rick Brayford

I ended up on Murdoch campus and started talking to people who said, why don't you come and do a degree? So I did the literacy thing. I did literacy programs the first three semesters, then a degree in communications. Then I went back and did radio and access to theatre and I got to know what that was. I was in my mid-twenties then I went back into radio for a year. And I wanted to do some teaching so I did a Dip Ed. They wanted me to teach media and English or something. So then they asked me if I wanted to go to Port Hedland. The money was great, and it was a full-time teaching position.

So I got up there and there is this beautiful 350-seat theatre. Right smack bang in the middle of a community. So I started making plays, and of course most of the students were Aboriginal. So I started doing night and weekend rehearsals and building theatre pieces up and basically taught myself along the way. I got one professional actor out, or a professional writer or a professional technician, to work on a production each year, which was until 1995. Then I got totally burnt out, I was knackered. So I came back down here and they gave me a job to get this drama programme cranked up at the school down here so I thought that sounds good. So in 1995 I decided to do study acting here at Edith Cowan University. It was a short one-year acting programme and did another year at Rossmore. So then I did it two years full-time directors' programme here and then after that I did hit shows and worked with big casts and did all that and blah blah blah.

But before I graduated while I was studying they got me in to do text work with the Aboriginal group. There were about four students, four girls. Cher was leaving and Bill McCluskey was coming in. It was like that. Cher Williams. Isaac Brandish is her brother. And then before I graduated, like, I was asked if I would apply to this job in Broome and restart the Indigenous music theatre programme out there which had been running before on and off. So I said, yeah this sounds good. I said to my wife, you know, I knew Broome, I knew that place, I worked in the Pilbara region for four or five years. So I knew people, I had contacts there. I'd worked with people like Sylvia Clark and I knew everybody from *Bran Nue Dae* and I knew a lot of those people because of living in Port Hedland and spending a lot of time in Broome and the Hedland connections like the Gregory mob.

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So I already knew most of the mob. I could get on the phone and say, look, this course was running, come in and have a chat to me so we can work out ways we can get them into town. And I think I got there in March and I had about two or three months to get things up and running. I had an office at Notre Dame. Again it was just me. I had an old cooking classroom. So we got everything out stripped down and repainted all walls back again, and curtains, mirrors in one end I could re-surfacing over the concrete floor and by the time we were ready to start and the place was ready to go with air conditioning it was bang into three-hour sessions a day, really hard. I raised the bar and we got some very good results. In one year we got about four into the acting course.

Richard Murphett
I did a lot of theatre at university at Monash and I did English honours, got a scholarship, and decided I wanted to that in drama. So, I did drama in Toronto Canada. It is something I am passionate about.

Pennelope Mullen
As a trainer? It has been an evolution from my work as a dancer and as a teacher. It came by accident. I was a trainer here at ACPA in movement, dance and theatre practice. I was asked to consult on curriculum development and then due to lack of staff I was asked to come in and coordinate performances, which lead to me being appointed Associate Artistic Director. I have a Masters in Choreography from QUT.

Kevin Jackson
I love it. Growing up in the fifties, I got to go to the movies every week, as well as the movies on television. I am inspired by the classic movies of that time. I never went to the theatre until I went to university.

John Clarke
No response.

Julie Warne
No response.

Nicolas Hills
I started my life as a drummer and played as a professional musician at clubs and RSLs. It was a cabaret band. We came back from Dubai where we had been for three months and I thought I could never play an ABBA medley again. So I went to a contemporary dance company workshop that was in town and I was head hunted and told I should audition for the company and so did my sister. She

had just started teacher training and she opted out, and I needed a career change and I always loved dance, so that's where I went and it all started from there. I went to the London School of Contemporary Dance. I was twenty-one. I transferred then to the Central School of Ballet because someone said my ballet was looking good and it would help me with work options. My first audition was with the Irish National Ballet Company and I got the job. I was there for about five years. It was a great apprenticeship. An incredible mix of choreographers. From contemporary to classical.

When I was ready I got an around-the-world ticket and landed back in New Zealand where I started to see if I got a buzz. I wanted to see if I could start again. It was great but too crowded. Then a job with the Queensland Ballet came up and I came over and auditioned and got the job. I thought it would only be a short gig and from there I would carry on around the world and set up back in England. But then I met Lisa who is my partner and I stayed two years at the Queensland Ballet until I decided I couldn't do another silly tiddly feet piece again. I had to get back to contemporary dance. I began training or retraining again with Expressions Dance Company. I was then offered a job with them and was with Expressions for about five years. That was great. Natalie Weare and Maggie Siestma. In 1997 I finished my professional career as a dancer and started a family. I picked up gigs with Opera Queensland and stuff. A teacher who was working in one of the productions I was in, told me they needed a teacher at the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts so I have been here eleven years. I recently resigned from the other place I was teaching at because I could not handle the bratishness anymore. In comparison to here where there is an honesty with the students that I can really work with.

Darryl Griffen

Music and sport are my hobbies, or interests. I don't know what made me become a teacher. I have always been a coach of some type.

2.3 How long have you worked in your current position?

Lynnette Williams

Eleven months.

Rick Brayford

I've been in this position since the year 2000. Both in Broome and here. I came back down here in '03. It was the beginning of '03.

Richard Murphett

I started here in 1990. My nomenclature has changed. I have been in this role for two years.

Pennelope Mullen Two years but in various positions for six years.

Kevin Jackson Full-time only six years. But I have been working at NIDA since 1984 so that would be twenty-four years I have worked at NIDA.

John Clarke No response.

Julie Warne No response.

Nicolas Hills Eleven years.

Darryl Griffen Nine years. I started in TAFE in 1992. I spent thirteen years as a primary school teacher. I moved across in 1992 and began working at the old Eora place till 1995. I then went out to Western Sydney as a trouble shooter out there, and then I got a full-time position in the Aboriginal Basic Education (ABE). This job came up and I started in semester 2 in 2000.

2.4 Can you tell me a little about what your job entails?

Lynnette Williams It is a new position and a combination of two previous positions. Instead of having an Artistic Director and a General Manager the board decided they wanted someone in charge of both artistic leadership and strategic management.

Rick Brayford Yep, I am a one-person show. I have a sessional budget for ten sessions a week. I'm in up to five sessions a week on sessional.

Richard Murphett Training theatre practitioners.

Pennelope Mullen I teach contemporary workshops in dance technique. About five hours a week. I develop in partnership with Leah Purcell who is our Artistic Director for about six weeks a year our major productions as Associate Director and Choreographer and as Associate Producer with the CEO. My role has also been to manage the curriculum and timetabling. I also work with external agencies in the industry and

employment areas developing memorandums of understanding to assist in the placement of students as well as creating pathways to other tertiary institutes. I coordinate gigs. I sometimes have to cover for the student liaison officer, as we have never had one longer than two months, so I am a social welfare officer at times. That entails assisting students with accommodation, ABSTUDY, psychologists, looking after their personal issues and issues on cultural identity where I refer them onto community elders. I also do timetabling and liaise with teachers. I am involved in CEDAC, the Curriculum and Education Development Advisory Committee. What my focus should be if we weren't constantly understaffed is industry and community liaison. My job is to monitor student skills and the teachers are delivering the curriculum. I also have to ensure there is a balance of mainstream and cultural units delivered. That's on my job description; everything else I do is because we just do not have the staff.

Kevin Jackson

I teach acting through class work. I teach through acquired experience and I direct.

John Clarke

No response.

Julie Warne

No response.

Nicolas Hills

I teach contemporary dance and ballet. I used to teach choreography, but that is only at Advanced Diploma level.

Darryl Griffen

The College Director position back then is different to what it is now. When I came on board I covered three Indigenous positions within the Institute. I was the Aboriginal Development Manager for Aboriginal Programs across the institute, I was Assistant Director to the Faculty of Aboriginal Studies, and I was College Director.

One role of mine is to increase the participation of Aboriginal people, and as much as I hate it I also have to be the expert in Aboriginal education, plus assisting with strategies to increase participation of Aboriginal people. When I first started it was all about being a centre for excellence for Aboriginal people.

Today I have a responsibility across the institute to get people involved in participating in TAFE programmes, as well as getting them

to enrol in certificate three level courses and above. Back then we offered a lot of entry level and preparatory courses like statement of attainments, certificate one and two levels. Certificate two is equivalent to year 10. COAG has determined that Australians need higher levels of attainments, plus course completions rates. The government looks at how money is spent. My position on the executive is not as the College Director of Eora but as the Aboriginal representative for the executive. The person I report to in Access and Equity reports on what occurs at Eora and is my line manager.

2.5 What is the main business of the organisation you work for?

Lynnette Williams

To discover and nurture the future leaders in the arts and entertainment industry in Australia. Previously it was more of a theatre school, but I think we need to look to the twenty-first century practices and to manoeuvre NIDA to be able to respond to those changes.

Rick Brayford

There is a bit of confusion with the title because it is called a Certificate IV in Theatre (Aboriginal). This is where the confusion comes from. Lots of non-Aboriginal people think that they would be learning about Aboriginality. But no, what there is, is a program specifically set up to help people of Indigenous descent to get through when maybe they've tried other times and there just hasn't been opportunities for them.

Richard Murphett

Training theatre practitioners.

Penelope Mullen

A Registered Training Organisation (RTO) so we are here to deliver certificate courses in the performing arts and to get students to complete those courses and to get in to the industry.

Kevin Jackson

It is a vocational school for people in the performing arts across all fields. When I direct, I work across all disciplines and streams in the school.

John Clarke

No response.

Julie Warne WAAPA is quite unique in that aspect. The only other place would be VCA where they offer dance, music, visual arts, film studies, and acting.

Nicolas Hills No response.

Darryl Griffen Education and training, full stop.

2.6 In what way is this business delivered?

Lynnette Williams Through a three-year undergraduate course in design stage and acting. Through postgraduate courses in directing, movement, playwriting and voice. That is the core business and that is training people for the business. It is very conservatoire based training which is immersive. It attracts people who are driven. It is also a networking opportunity unlike say WAAPA because WAAPA isn't in the centre of the entertainment industry.

Rick Brayford Well, look, we work within a Western context but within this Western structure we find another way to make it work. We have rules within the rules. We have exceptions to the rules. But there are no rules to the exceptions.

Richard Murphett Combination of three-year undergraduate training and two-year postgraduate specialist training. The training is practical but at the post-graduate level there is more reading.

Pennelope Mullen Our retention is at 85% and other creative industries at TAFE level are at about the 30% mark retention. We do destination surveys when students leave and we know where they are, but also we are a family and they come back every other day anyway. But we always know where our students are. Some are at Queensland Theatre Company, some are at various dance companies, and others are out in the communities.

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Kevin Jackson

Practical with not much theory. I work mainly with first years. I provide a really organised method of approach, which is what I have made up from my own experiences. It changes from year to year but it is practical. It is a lot like high school mathematics; I present ideas and we work through these ideas by way of practical exercises. To find their own work method through practical endeavour.

John Clarke

.No response.

Julie Warne

No response.

Nicolas Hills

No response.

Darryl Griffen

Through its courses.



The University of Sydney

3 KEY QUESTIONS 1-9

Trainers

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

3.1 Can you tell me what the words 'actor training' means to you?

Lynnette Williams

I think it is about the changes in dramatic art. It is not just playing in a black box. There are many more contexts where actors work nowadays and we need to be able to prepare our students for a range of contexts. A lot of our students go Strait into film and television and even though we advertise the course as Theatre, Film and Television we don't deliver equally in those contexts. They only get a few workshops in film and TV and then go out there as a NIDA graduate feeling unprepared. The whole convergence thing is an opportunity with mobile phones and new medias, which is a whole new area for actors.

Rick Brayford

We like to get them semi-professional. Or get them ready for paid work. What this is about is getting them ready for meaningful work. Turning up, being disciplined. So I know that they are not forgetting what they learnt. They are taking direction, giving the director what they want. They understand the ethic of acting, you know.

Richard Murphett

Getting people who are interested in theatre the skills that will enable them to do the kind of creative work they want to do. I don't think it is training for industry but for a profession. It is an intermittent thing. It makes you a good citizen.

Pennelope Mullen

I actually don't like the word training; I have a problem with that term. I guess it is skills development but I don't think the word encompasses what actors need. I think I prefer the word teacher as the word trainer is cold and clinical and you are delivering a set of skills and that's it. A teacher has a more holistic approach developing the student's humanity alongside the skills.

Kevin Jackson

Development of a human being. To get into NIDA they have to be able to act and all we can do is to make them better actors. I don't care whether you are a better actor or not so long as you are a better person at the end of the course. That is what is important to me.

John Clarke

I think what it means to me is firstly you can't teach someone to be an actor if they are not. So the first is to be able to identify great exciting communicators who have the potential to be great. The second is to provide a space to work in where they can learn physical skills, because if you can't be heard you are not a good communicator, if your body won't do what you want it to do then that is no good, so the skills to communicate. And lastly provide them with the knowledge of the industry or the environment they will be working in. Also a bit of history because if you don't understand history you will keep repeating it. Then of course to assist the potential artist with the courage and confidence to follow their dreams and be able to attract attention and interest in the imaginary life they are representing. Identifying talent, teaching skills, knowledge, confidence as artists. What actor-training is not is determining the future of theatre. That is for the young to do.

Julie Warne

No response.

Nicolas Hills

No response.

Darryl Griffen

Training actors, simple.

3.2 What is your client/student base made up from?

Lynnette Williams

There are a lot of people from privileged education like Barker College who prepare their students for further careers in acting. What is it that is not happening in the public school system? Why do they not have curriculum that allows for an acting career? Arts don't seem a viable career for students from poorer schools.

Rick Brayford

Aboriginal students. We do take non-Indigenous sometimes if they are married to the mob.

Richard Murphett

Mainly middle class Anglo, early twenties. But, as Australia becomes more diverse, so do we become in our intake.

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- Pennelope Mullen
Demographic is 99% Indigenous students and the age range is seventeen to thirty-three years. The median age is about twenty years old.
- Kevin Jackson
Each year we take in up to twenty-five students. Fifteen boys to ten girls. This varies. They are mostly middle class. This is something I have been trying to change. Personally, I come from a lower middle class working class family. Ethnically, it has changed considerably in the last twelve years. In the first year at the moment, we have two boys who identify as Indigenous. I have a boy from New Guinea, an Australian boy who doesn't identify, two Chinese Australians and Australian Greek students. The story of Australia isn't just white Anglo-Saxon anymore. To tell those stories we need a diversity of actors. You need to find those authentic voices to tell those stories from a place of truth.
- John Clarke
If you look at the names on the graduation lists over the years more and more have European names. In the 1990s more names that are Asian and more Indigenous people came in. Not because we were pushing that barrow but because they were talented people. They got into NIDA because of their potential. If you don't have the ability to keep up it can be a very savage place. I have been always reluctant to take people without potential.
- Julie Warne
No response.
- Nicolas Hills
Not dissimilar to dance. You need to be aware of yourself in the space and of others. There is also becoming used to the sound of your voice and how to use it. The affect on stage and focus. These are the basics. We don't do a lot of character development. But just making people feel something different.
- Darryl Griffen
Originally it was 100% Aboriginal, now it is not. It is about 69% Aboriginal at the moment. I did the maths the other day. We have 410 enrolments and of that 265 are Aboriginal in certificate three and above.

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3.3 How many indigenous students do you enrol each year, and how many graduate?

Lynnette Williams

It depends on how many get through the audition process. Last year we had five but this year we were a bit disappointed. I hope to build on the more successful year.

Rick Brayford

I have a 50% success rate. If I take on fourteen students I graduate seven. It's a minimum of 50% success rate. I looked at all the figures from other Aboriginal schools like NAISDA who only make 20%. This year they made 10%. I was the only one to make 50%. I'm making 50% every year.

Richard Murphett

We don't have a quota. Since I have been Head of School, we have provided specialist audition training to those who need it. No given on that. Historically quite a few haven't graduated. By the time they get to through the second year, which is the start of a lot of text work, often they decide that they don't want to do a lot of text so they either go somewhere else or get engaged with it. That happens with any student. At the moment, we have two in actor training. One is in first year the other is in second year. We hope that they will both graduate.

Pennelope Mullen

Roughly between thirty and fifty. We have about twenty new enrolments a year. I have just begun a pilot program called the Monday Program. In Queensland high school students have one day off a week and we have developed a curriculum for them doing their certificate three as a preparation for coming here later. 85% graduate.

Kevin Jackson

We don't have a quota. From year to year, it varies. It is a preoccupation of my own, plus John Clarke's, to find Indigenous actors. I carry on that philosophy. We attempt to take the best twenty-four applicants a year regardless of what backgrounds they are or come from. I would say that each year six automatically pick themselves, then the others are where we find a diversity of student intake. With Indigenous students we always ask who is the best actor, or who do you think will make the best actor, or who will make the biggest contribution to society from a result of being here? We base it on the potential for the bigger period.

John Clarke

I set up a movement course one year and that course was entirely made up of Indigenous people. The course was especially geared to

them.

No response.

Julie Warne

85%.

Nicolas Hills

Over 200. It varies. Some years are better than others. Minimum of about 60% graduate.

Darryl Griffen

3.4 Do you believe that the course you deliver provides the necessary training for Indigenous actors to find work in the industry?

Lynnette Williams

I think they do have special needs and wherever we can we try to address those. We have had students that required English lessons. Whether that was something not addressed in their schooling I don't know, but we have an arrangement with the University of NSW. There are some requirements in the General Studies area that require a level of academic engagement and some of the Indigenous students struggle in this area. Having said that, our staff are just fantastic. And they are flexible with the assessment criteria.

Rick Brayford

Yes.

Richard Murphett

I don't know what that training is as the industry deals with Indigenous actors quite weirdly anyway. There have been attempts over the years to provide specific training to the needs of Indigenous actors. However, they come here with the same stars in their eyes as everyone else. They might have a different cultural background and they bring a different experiential thing to it. They usually want to work in theatre, film and television. Then they find the hard knot. That is a long way of saying that in the next few years there needs to be a shift in training to deal with both the talent and the needs of Indigenous actors. I don't think the WAAPA unit is the way we want to go but more like a shift away from classical texts and more towards theatre making. Interestingly, it is the amateur course that has been the best route here for the Indigenous students.

Pennelope Mullen

Yes.

Kevin Jackson

Yes.

John Clarke

The thing was to attract the best of the young people and give them the skills to get out there and let them do what they wanted to do, irrespective of where you came from.

Julie Warne

No response.

Nicolas Hills

I don't really see much of the acting side of the course. I am involved in the CEDAC process. It is really the needs of the group that define the course that needs to be delivered.

Darryl Griffen

I would have to ask my teacher that. I am not sure that all performing arts courses prepare students for work in the industry.

You have to ask if certificate level courses are enough to secure work in a competitive market.

3.5 What is your understanding of indigenous theatre and performance practice?

Lynnette Williams

I have been away twenty-five years and I have noticed a marked difference. When I left here it was a bit political, precious, this is my territory don't come near it. I feel there is a new openness where people want to share more and want people to understand. I had quite a moving experience myself when I worked with the Perth Festival; this is quite some time ago. A composer wanted to use a book, *The Sisters*, that two sisters wrote and they were the daughters of a landowner and they had grown up with Aboriginal children and knew all the Dreamtime stories. They wrote a book. They were the Durack sisters. It was a very well-known book and I was asked to write a libretto for it. I was worried because two older white ladies and their stolen stories wrote it. In the end the thing was stopped. That was in 1986. I had my fingers burnt with that one and I continued to work in Europe.

Rick Brayford

That put me across the line to say to myself, okay you have a culture, and this is an existing industry, once we train you up, you have a choice. You can package up your culture, you can use your skills and go back to the community if you want to. But that's after they

have training and when they choreograph pieces they are much sharper, they are much better. So they are able to use this training for their own choice. Not because I'm deciding that they can't do culture, that's not my business. It's not the institution's business. Better you get that from your mob. I mean you can bring it with you. It is in every Indigenous play. However, let's train you for an industry, not just something that is closed like culture. In that way we're asking the industry, what about those black Hamlets? What about the first Ophelia? What about the first black King Lear?

Richard Murphett

I don't know if I would generalise like that as there is a lot of different ways in which they approach theatre practice. There is issue based, intuitive and for me I look to Wesley [Enoch] and see how his approach is to use both. He doesn't work in a recognised genre. Essentially, he is passionate about his indigeneity and passionate about his theatre. That would be my model of what Indigenous theatre should be.

Pennelope Mullen

We have a very clear vision statement and that is to nurture the unique qualities of Indigenous students in a creative and human way by reconnecting disenfranchised students back into working with community. Essentially it is a contemporary environment they will be entering but it is essential they gain some understanding of cultural knowledge whilst they are here. And to develop their own perceptions of what it means to have an Indigenous identity as an actor here in Australia to imbue their cultural development and work. Developing a core perspective of being an Indigenous performer. It doesn't mean that every play they write has to be thematically Indigenous. But because they are Indigenous they have had comprehensive training in skills and cultural practices. Then they can go out into the industry with contemporary skills plus a rich cultural base from which to draw on. And we hope they will evolve that culture in a creative way. For instance, we are heavily into Indigenous fusion dance. Now Bangarra already does that quite successfully. We look at different methodologies so we don't just create another Bangarra. We have creative process studies that work with stimulus. And that stimulus is drawn from a connection to a cultural experience.

Kevin Jackson

Only from what I know from the students who already have worked as cultural ambassadors in dance and in tourist areas. I know about the appearance of the Black Theatre and then the socially conscious theatre that Belvoir Street Theatre does. I know culture through those areas.

My first contact came through an actor called Charles Little in *The Cradle of Hercules*, which was a play about Governor Philip and Bennelong. Charlie played Bennelong. David Gulpilil was in that theatre production. That was in 1974. I was aware from that time on. I never met an Aboriginal person before I met them through the theatre. It was exotic and fascinating. Charlie was a short guy who worked in film a lot. He was given a lot of opportunities and was less Aboriginal and more white. Gulpilil was from the Northern Territory and it was his first or second job. The story is we are in this architectural wonder of the world, the Sydney Opera House, and David had a cultural problem with someone and he had to fly home to do cultural business.

The Opera House is on Bennelong Point. I think it was the first time a company had engaged an Indigenous story. So here I was, on contact with this amazing spirituality in the modern world. The Indigenous company was from mostly outside of Sydney and they would often just not turn up. John Gaden was playing Phillip. Charlie who played Bennelong was a professional, whereas the others didn't quite engage in what we expect as professional behaviour. The Indigenous students we have now are very different because of their exposure to a regime. It is cultural traits fitting into the cultural constraints of the white structure of a training school. That has been the biggest dilemma of the past twenty years, and how do we accommodate that within the structure of the school?

John Clarke

We hit a period in the sixties and seventies, as I am sure you are aware, where Indigenous militancy began to come up strongly and there was a feeling generating that we were 'whitefellas' and they wanted to do it their way. I had a spot on the Arts Council and played a part in Bob Maza coming here to run a theatre company in Redfern. It didn't last long. It wasn't the first to hit the wall. About that time there was this militancy and mistrust. I always got on well with Indigenous people that I have come across in my time. What happened then was that people slowly started to put up their hand and one of the first was Justine Saunders. She was an already established actress. Today there are too many rules at NIDA whereas at that time we said, okay, you are established and a bit older so why don't you come in and spend a year with us.

You can take the Diploma. I mean, that's not important, it was what Justine brought to NIDA and what she got from us. Government requirements and regulations now prevent us from being that flexible. It has been creeping in for a long time. NIDA must adhere to forty-two acts of parliament and there are so many rules and regulations. I think the way it is managed at the moment is that it has to become corporatised. The spontaneity and the ability to act quickly with inspiration is difficult. It took a long time for

Indigenous militants to realise that NIDA was not pushing a white man's barrow. What it was pushing was an educational barrow to help young people do things better, whether you were black, white or whatever.

Julie Warne

No response.

Nicolas Hills

I think we are trying to get away from stereotypes. You don't want to be the guy in the lap-lap with a didgeridoo over your shoulder and you only get a credit for the stereotype you are portraying. That only speaks to a part of someone's history.

Darryl Griffen

Promoting Aboriginal people and story lines, beliefs, points of view, perspectives.

3.6 Are there any Indigenous performance perspectives incorporated into the delivery of your programs?

Lynnette Williams

There could be more. We do a lot in General Studies. We discussed issues of tolerance and different religions. We have a lot of visiting speakers. Karen Vickery runs the course. I am wondering if some of the Aboriginal students could take more responsibility for that, and I think that happens a lot in the acting classes.

Rick Brayford

We don't teach culture; the culture was getting in the way, if you like. So I saw my role as running in and setting up these things, and the cultural side of the people was really nothing to do with me and nothing to do with the institution. The engagement with cultural practice is often dependent on the particular group. All that community we might be linked with through that group. So if you're going to go down the line of cultural training, what and how do you begin that? Look, we talk about culture every day, all day. I share with them what I know and they share what they know. When I say we don't teach culture, I also I mean, look, because anything you do even if you're taking up the same story that's been told fifty times. The differences are that now it's being told from a black perspective. It is a contemporary story or a traditional story. The 'whitefellas' aren't used to listening to or from a black perspective. Anything we do, we do from a black perspective. For example, we take a white musical – we are doing it from a black perspective. So, they actually get a lot of history along the way. We always do one Jack Davis a year, and whatever one we're working on by the time we're a month into rehearsal we are all quite up to date on the history associated with that play. The exploration of students' identity as

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- Richard Murphett
Aboriginal actors is limited in a big city, more accessible when they are strongly connected to their communities.
No.
- Pennelope Mullen
It is structured and non-structured. So in Certificate three and four there are core units like exploring Indigenous performance practices, examining Indigenous perspectives. Create and tell stories. They are just some of the core units across the certificate levels.
Indigenous teachers deliver these units.
- Kevin Jackson
No, the structure of the programme stays the same as it does for every culture. However, we encourage Indigenous students to bring their culture into the work. In the first year, we like to get that cross-cultural reference and for people to get to know each other. We encourage in first term storytelling. However, one student felt she couldn't show us a dance because it belonged to a family member.
One student the year before was more open to showing what he knew.
- John Clarke
No response.
- Julie Warne
No response.
- Nicolas Hills
I come from a dance background but we work with sound and significance from the individual experiences. We look for the pulse and rhythm of the individual.
- Darryl Griffen
Yes of course, it is an Aboriginal college.
- 3.7 If so, how?**
- Darryl Griffen
It may not be incorporated or written in the course but one would, again, hope that the teachers are localising and contextualising the subjects to be culturally sensitive. I would not use the word 'appropriate' because I think that notion is crap.

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3.8 If not, why?

Kevin Jackson The course structure is set. But within that structure there is space for devising their own material.

Richard Murphett

It is difficult to include in the layering of skill-based learning something that is specific to a culture. If we did Indigenous performance practice then everyone would have to do them and then that asks, is that appropriate? John Bolton, Michelle, and I have been discussing what would be best for Indigenous actors, as I don't think this as it stands is. It would be great to get another stream together that had more diversity in its delivery rather than the skills based training, which you yourself have experienced.

3.9 Are you aware of the Aboriginal Arts Board drama principles for working with Indigenous performers?

Lynnette Williams No.

Rick Brayford No.

Richard Murphett No.

Penelope Mullen No.

Kevin Jackson No response.

John Clarke No response.

Julie Warne No response.

Nicolas Hills No response.

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Darryl Griffen No.

3.10 Do you think that Indigenous students would benefit from knowing more about their cultural and performance heritage?

Lynnette Williams I am not sure about that. I assume that some Indigenous students who come from urban areas probably know less than the students from rural areas. I think we could do more about providing classes with the urban students. I am not sure.

Rick Brayford My thinking there and in all my years talking with all the aunts and all the uncles is that we train up big, skill them up, and we give them as much technique and craft for the existing industry that is meaningful for career and for work, something that already exists out there by not having to develop it as we go. Once they graduate how they use that and culture, that they may want to package themselves in performance, is none of our business

Richard Murphett Yes. I think every student would benefit from that.

Pennelope Mullen Yes.

Kevin Jackson Absolutely.

John Clarke No response.

Julie Warne No response.

Nicolas Hills Yes, I do. Again, we respond to the needs of the group. Some students have a strong connection to culture and some do not have any. So without shaming some students we work out how to balance those needs. There is sensitivity in that process. When non-Indigenous teachers start to teach here, unless they are clued in – and I know I went through this myself – they adopt the missionary position. Seeing the difference rather than the similarities as well as accepting that the differences can be spoken about. You need to come to a

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point of trust before you can truly communicate with someone and as a performer that is a 'given'. I acknowledge difference but without the similarity I couldn't acknowledge the difference; all I would be seeing is a one-sided view. When it comes to delivery it is like with the experience of shame. This is different to attitude and it's important to know the difference. This experience can happen in any class but there are subtle differences in how to handle it as opposed to the way the white middle class 'Dolly Dinkle' school line class may do it. This is having been exposed early to classes in jazz, tap, ballet.

The missionary position is a defence mechanism where teachers find themselves confronted with students who come from a different perspective and asking something different from the teacher. It is so easy to say, 'They don't understand Shakespeare.' Well, they never have read Shakespeare before, so read it in class. They don't last long. The students haven't come through the same educational experience, they haven't read Shakespeare and they haven't been taken to the theatre before. So they don't know the plays that that particular type of teacher will reference, from their experience. What those teachers should be asking is what stories do these students know that are of equal value to the ones you might be quoting or are familiar with that you don't have access to.

Darryl Griffen

Yes. It is not an Aboriginal question; this is a cultural question. If everybody knows who they are and where they came from then it is about taking on the values of their culture. If they don't know these things I don't think that they can develop themselves as a human being. I am not a traditional person nor brought up that way. But my grandfather was.



The University of Sydney

4. FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS 1-4

Trainers

Researcher's name: Liza-Mare Syron

Email: lsyr2785@usyd.edu.au

4.1 Do you believe that non-Indigenous students would benefit from knowledge on Indigenous performance and cultural heritage?

- Lynnette Williams Yes. There are assumptions made that Australian actors would know something about Indigenous performance practice. I think there is a space for it. We teach Butoh and Stanislavski, why not the total Australian experience?
- Rick Brayford No response.
- Richard Murphett Yes. But, I am wary. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. There is a fascination for it. We ask, how do we deliver it?
- Pennelope Mullen Yes.
- Kevin Jackson Absolutely. It is imperative that there be that exchange. One student who was full blood who was strongly culturally connected in his community used to tell us stories of how he lived in those communities. I thought it was essential that all students and staff should know what he was navigating by his engagement with his culture and in being here with us. We try to treat everyone the same, so I would ask him why he wasn't jumping the hurdles that the other students were required to jump. If you don't know his circumstances then you can't make allowances for him. Once you know the cultural differences, everyone then understands where and why he does what he does. Sometimes the non-Indigenous actors don't understand why the Indigenous actors come to the work from a different place. It is out of ignorance that we don't understand difference. I am learning from my students on cultural protocols so the students are learning from Indigenous students being in the class. All sections of NIDA learn from Indigenous students when we are putting on a show. We didn't know how complex cultural responsibilities were involved.

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John Clarke No response.

Julie Warne No response.

Nicolas Hills No response.

Darryl Griffen

When Eora started there was a push, particularly here at Eora, there was this push to stigmatise Aboriginal people as dancers, artists, and actors. I think we are more than that. There is a decline in arts and media here at Eora. People need jobs and there is a commitment by government to get Aboriginal people jobs. Sometimes I think that Aboriginal people think that being an artist is all they can do. It has been how we have been able to express our selves through story and song.

I know this is not necessarily what you want to hear, but younger Aboriginal people are disconnected from culture, especially here in the city. In country towns they are in a community and that is a different experience. The kids here still don't know who they are. They know they are Aboriginal, but they don't know what that means. They don't have that connection to who they are.

4.2 Is there anything you would like to add in regard to the questions or answers?

Lynnette Williams No response.

Rick Brayford No response.

Richard Murphett No response.

Pennelope Mullen No response.

Kevin Jackson Look, we operate from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm plus the preparation and the application from the work the day before. The discipline has

changed dramatically over the last five or six years. Before this time, Indigenous students would struggle and we made significant allowances for them. Instead of failing them for professional discipline, we made those allowances. There has been a shift over the last two years. Part of the reason why I take some Indigenous students is not because they would make good actors but they would make great community teachers etcetera.

John Clarke

No response.

Julie Warne

No response.

Nicolas Hills

No response.

Darryl Griffen

I don't think the gap between employment of Aboriginal people and the wider community has changed. I don't think we have closed the gap in many years. In fact I think it has gotten bigger. It still has a lot to do with confidence. In the past Aboriginal people have been kept out of schools and this is only thirty years or so ago. So, Aboriginal people have only been engaged in education, which is a foreign environment, for only thirty years. I think we are doing bloody good, considering those details. Up until 1972 the policy was that Aboriginal people could be excluded from class.

There are cultural differences in schools between Aboriginal kids and non-Aboriginal kids. Generally the support at home for them to do well in school doesn't exist. Most parents had a very bad experience of the education system. And they pass these perceptions on to their kids. Aboriginal people raise their children differently.

If non-Aboriginal people do not know anything about our culture then there will always be trust issues based on cultural differences. One example, when I was working out at Mount Druitt. A teacher there told me that the Aboriginal kids don't look him in the eye. And that particular teacher interpreted this as being shifty and untrustworthy. I had to explain to him that some in cultures you don't stare people in the eye and that the kid was probably showing respect. In regard to culture, there has to be a total celebration of culture, not just by Aboriginal people but from the Australian people. We then need to move on.

4.3 If you were in charge, what changes would you make to the training course?

- Lynnette Williams I am in charge.
- Rick Brayford No response.
- Richard Murphett No response.
- Pennelope Mullen No response.
- Kevin Jackson No response.
- John Clarke No response.
- Julie Warne No response.
- Nicolas Hills No response.
- Darryl Griffen No response.

4.4 Of all the information you have generously shared with this research, what do you think is of most importance for the training of Indigenous actors?

- Lynnette Williams NIDA is going through a change and we are starting to reflect the Australia of today. We are not there yet.
We need Aboriginal people to share with us the knowledge they have and create the space for that.
Maybe the flexibility for electives that address the changing needs of performance for actors.
Developing a foundation course that will provide the opportunities for more Indigenous students to engage with acting skills and knowledge. Engaging the postgraduate students with local Indigenous communities and projects.
- Rick Brayford No response.
- Richard Murphett We have been discussing our teachers going out into communities to run workshops rather than always expecting Indigenous people to come here. There is the case of Jadah Milroy who came here and did the acting course for two years and then she said she would get more out of the third year by doing the amateur course. I think that is a good idea. The first year being primarily experiential, the

second year which is more text based and disciplined, then the third year might be something where you can do something culturally specific or not.

There is no need doing a whole lot of roles in plays if that's not what you want to do. So, I feel we have the courses here but in combination, it could be more interesting.

Pennelope Mullen

I think the main problems, as an RTO delivering training to Indigenous students is that we are under-resourced, with money and student support. Staff like myself have had to go out and take ropes from around students' necks when they are suicidal. We have had to put students up in our homes at times. People who classify RTO status do not acknowledge that. The students come to us very raw and they haven't had ten years of piano or ballet or acting classes as a kid. They come here and they have three years to be industry ready. The RTO approach to competencies doesn't work or translate to industry. I know from my own experience that if I were just competent I would be working out at the Betty Ballet School in Ipswich. You have to be a lot more than competent to make it in the performing arts industry. So competency based training is problematic for performance skills. There needs to be a way of awarding higher levels of accomplishment like distinctions. Competency based training in the arts is the lowest standard; it's awarded a pass. We develop individual timetables for each student to push them into areas that will develop their skills holistically.

For example, a student who is an excellent rapper, I would encourage them into both dance and story telling to provide them with a broader context from which to draw on. We have a lot of really talented dancers here with no formal training so I double the amount of dance classes they receive to get them to a high standard quickly so they can compete with graduates from other institutes who have been doing it since they were five and do dance at QUT all day every day. We write our own courses and there are units that are used by TAFE and RTOS nationally and we can pick from those units. Anything that doesn't meet our needs we write. If it is an Indigenous unit only, Indigenous people write and develop that unit. We can comment on those on their deliverability. If it is a dance unit, then a dancer will write it. Administrators do not write it. Industry meet and we go over the units again and then we put together the programme. Then it goes to Government to discuss the legalities of delivering these units.

Some of our Indigenous students have been disconnected from culture and have been brought up without cultural connection. Indigenous culture must be preserved and it must evolve. As we are producing the next generation of Indigenous performers we have

APPENDIX B

an obligation to provide cultural units in their training. It is strength of voice as an artist. Individual Indigenous artists have their own voice that needs to be heard. Through our CEDAC program the non-Indigenous members were concerned when our first curriculum had no units on Indigenous culture. Yet it is almost impossible to get Indigenous trainers with the documentation required to deliver training in an RTO. They do not have their training in workplace assessment. No. Grooming the next generation of trainers is our job. A generation who have the qualifications required to teach in RTOs.

Kevin Jackson	No response.
John Clarke	No response.
Julie Warne	No response.
Nicolas Hills	No response.
Darryl Griffen	No response.