



Collaboration or appropriation? Why I turned my back on the STC

Why we need a national indigenous theatre company

H LAWRENCE SUMNER



“This is a beautiful piece of writing by one of the most exciting new voices to come along in many years.”

So says the Sydney Theatre Company copy for *The Long Forgotten Dream*. I’m uneasy with this description. Now more than ever.

Uneasy with the perception of hypocrisy. Because it can be seen as hypocritical to complain about the loss of voice. When your debut for the STC is on stage at the Sydney Opera House — *The Long Forgotten Dream* had its premiere last month — loss of voice should be the least of your worries.

Great reviews. An amazing cast. Then an unexpected front page after I spoke out about the way my play had been staged, followed by Twitter outrage from the usual offended. But contrary to their opinion, my motive is grace.

My desire is to always eschew hypocrisy and my intent is to write truth. And I struggle with the incongruity of my anger alongside the considered nature of the work involved in so-called artistic collaboration.

It has been suggested that a dialogue had been kept open at all times between the director and myself, as the writer of this new play. Yes, open — until I disagreed. Then collaboration turned into appropriation. Along the way I was asked to edit major speeches that were too “confrontational”. I ignored that request. I doubt the play would have been as successful had I cut the core argument from it. The rehearsal process, for

me at least, consisted of daily battles. Every rehearsal has them.

Ill at ease in the room and despondent in my practice, I simply gave up. Because my contract did not mean a thing. Directors may find it hard to understand but a writer is invested in their play. My investment lowered in value as my play — which told a story about ancestral bones returning to their homeland, invoking the injustices of the past and the trauma of the present for a small town — was altered to suit a more palatable form and style.

I arrived at dress rehearsal to find that one of my characters had suddenly grown dragonfly wings, with the end of my play changed from what was written and stage elements in the script simply ignored. It took me a week of emails, phone calls and a text three hours before opening night to remove those damned wings. That text ended my relationship with the company. I didn’t care. I still don’t.

The “authentic indigenous voice” is a hard subject to broach. Even the notion of authenticity is slippery. A white director may innocently assume that they know what is best for an indigenous play. Other times they know exactly what they’re doing. The director, because of their Western status, assumes authority. Not only over the physical manifestation of the script but the very essence of the Aboriginal voice.

I’m not claiming this is happening in every rehearsal room. But why are some Aboriginal writers so keen to let white directors off the hook when these same writers rail against perceived injustices from a politician, a taxi driver or a mining company? Simply because we are in an artistic situation does not mean the accumulated cultural privilege of a white director will change. They always have a fallback position. Whiteness, in the Australian context.

Since Federation, the arts scene in Australian society has been dominated by a kind of artis-

tic colonialism. Historically, the type of art hung on the walls of

parliament and galleries, the music and plays performed, were chosen by people heavily influenced by social Darwinism. As a result, theatres, galleries and cultural exhibitions became a stomping ground for the most insidiously covert form of racism.

It is that very history of artistic colonialism that affords any major theatre company the ability to cherry-pick not only projects but writers. Under-representation occurs not because male Aboriginal writers aren’t writing but because they fall prey to the residue of this history. Those operating in this paradigm will more than likely take the easiest route — to choose a writer who suits the company narrative. Or are we so naive as to think that the effects of colonial residue somehow stop at the doorposts and lintels of our theatre companies?

The Australian theatrical canon does contain male indigenous writers. But try sitting down with tertiary drama students to name them. The indigenous students may know the names, for they are trying to follow in the steps of the mighty. But right now,

off the top of your head, name 10 Australian Aboriginal male playwrights in the canon. Did you have to stop and think? If we are well represented, you shouldn’t pause. In this particular year in theatre, I can think of only three Aboriginal male writers who have works on main stage.

The cautious conclusion is that a national indigenous theatre company might be required.

I did not arrive at this idea in the past few weeks. My application to a doctorate program at Flinders University a few years ago asked this very question in the thesis. What form it takes will eventually work itself out. But I’m tired of the same famous black names ranting about how long they’ve been talking. Probably best to get on with it, without the



excuse that it's complicated.

I'm not calling for collaboration with other companies to stop. But wouldn't it be nice to one day have a theatre that Aboriginal artists and audiences called their own? If not a building, at the very least a national framework of co-operating artists that we might one day call our National Aboriginal Theatre? Here's hoping my voice might be one in many hundreds, if that day comes.

H Lawrence Sumner's play The Long Forgotten Dream is at the Sydney Opera House until August 25.

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HEIDRUN LOHR

Wayne Blair in STC's *The Long Forgotten Dream*