

Company B Belvoir presents
the Ilbijerri & Torres Strait Islander Theatre Cooperative &
Playbox co-production of

STOLEN

by Jane HARRISON

Anne - Tammy ANDERSON
Ruby - Kylie BELLING
Jimmy - Elliot MAYNARD
Shirley - Pauline WHYMAN
Sandy - Stan YARRAMUNUA/Robert PATTEN

directed by Wesley ENOCH
designed by Richard ROBERTS
lighting by Matt SCOTT
sound design by David CHESWORTH

stage manager Tiffany NOACK,
tour manager Richard DINNEN,
Company Manager Sarah KERNOT,
tour production manager Armando LICUL,
technical manager Baird McKENNA

Publicist: Moore Publicity

Belvoir St Theatre and Company B Belvoir

The Belvoir St Theatre and Company B were born from action taken to save the Nimrod Theatre building from demolition in 1984. Rather than lose this inner city performance space, more than 600 theatre lovers, arts, entertainment and media professionals formed a syndicate to buy the building. This syndicate included many prominent Australian show business personalities, including Patrick White, Judy Davis, Mel Gibson, Nicole Kidman and Sam Neill. Company B is the resident production company at Belvoir St Theatre.

Company B is run on a parity system. Remuneration of all employees of the Company is made in accordance with the Company's parity pay policy. The philosophy behind this policy is a belief in the equal value of the contribution of every employee. Rather than remunerate staff by reference to their market rate, all employees, including the cleaners, actors, production and administration staff, Artistic Director and General Manager are paid the same hourly rate per week.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Stolen is a project that began in 1992 when the Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Theatre Co-operative commissioned Jane Harrison and a researcher to produce a work about the lost children as they were then known.

The Brief was to tell many stories, not just one, and to not represent Kooris as homogenous people who think, feel and react the same way.

Over six years, *The Lost Children* evolved into the play *Stolen*. It was first performed in 1997 at a joint Playbox Theatre and Ilbjerri Indigenous Theatre-In-The-Raw series.

In 1998 Playbox and Ilbjerri, in association with, the Melbourne Festival presented *Stolen* in the Beckett Theatre at the C.U.B. Malthouse.

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

Stolen sketches the stories of five children taken from their families in early childhood and the impact this has on their lives and those of their families. The main link between the five characters is that they were all stolen and placed in a children home, although not necessarily at the same time. In many scenes they interact as though they were there together.

The script is a non-linear narrative, which merges past and present. However, the play does begin with the characters as children and end with the resolution of their characters – where they are at the present moment in time, the end result of all that has gone before.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The following information is from *Bringing Them Home Taskforce Newsletter* produced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

What is the *Bringing Them Home Report*?

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission held an Inquiry, which investigated the past laws, policies and practices of Australian Governments relating to the removal of Indigenous children from their families. The Report from this Inquiry was called *Bringing Them Home* and was handed down on 26 May, 1997.

Who are the Stolen Generations?

The Stolen Generations are those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were separated from their families by compulsion, duress or undue influence under the past laws, practices and policies of the Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory governments.

How many children were removed?

Between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were separated from their families and communities in the period 1910 to 1970. In certain regions and in certain periods, the figure was undoubtedly much greater than one in ten.

Why were the children removed?

The ultimate purpose of removal was to control the reproduction of Indigenous people, with a view to 'merging' or 'absorbing' them into the non-Indigenous population and to 'assimilate' and/or 'integrate' them into European society.

What were the effects of separation?

The *Bringing Them Home Report* identified wide-ranging mental health problems associated with the policies, practices and laws of removal and separation. Many of those removed suffered a variety of abuse and trauma, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse and contempt and denigration of Aboriginality. Another aspect for consideration is the issue surrounding unresolved trauma and grief, which has its own consequences.

The Bringing Them Home Report is worth looking at if your students are interested in an in depth look at the issues surrounding the Stolen Generations. The report can be viewed in part on the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity's web page.

BEFORE THE THEATRE VISIT

- ◆ List the emotions the word **stolen** brings to mind.
- ◆ Using the word **stolen** as a starting point, improvise a piece that reflects your understanding of the word.
- ◆ Write about a time when you have had something **stolen**.
- ◆ Think about a time when you have been accidentally separated from your family (e.g. lost at a shopping centre). Discuss your feelings and emotions. Write them down.
- ◆ What do you know about the Stolen Generations? Write a list. What would you like to know? Write a list. Review these after seeing *Stolen*. What else do you need to know?
- ◆ Talk to your parents and grandparents and ask them what they know about the Stolen Generations.
- ◆ Research
Australian Government Assimilation/Integration Policies Newspaper articles on the 'Stolen Generations' particularly letters to the editor around the time that the *Bringing Them Home Report* was handed down. Look at articles written in the newspapers at the end of March this year after the Government's new findings on the Stolen Generations.
- ◆ Log on to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Web site www.atsic.gov.au and look for information on the Stolen Generation go to the links for the *Bringing Them Home Report*.
- ◆ Contact your local council and see whether there is a local reconciliation group. If there is, ask if someone is willing to come to your school and talk to you.
- ◆ List your expectations of the theatre visit to *Stolen*.

AT THE THEATRE

- ◆ Look at the stage. What are your first impressions? What, if any, emotions do you feel before the actors arrive on the stage?
- ◆ Think about your first impressions of each character. Is there any thing particular about any one character?
- ◆ Do you notice anything interesting about the staging?
- ◆ How has the playwright included extra characters without needing extra actors?
- ◆ Are there any questions you would like to ask the characters? Try and remember.
- ◆ Are you laughing? What is it you are laughing at?
- ◆ What emotions are you feeling during the play?
- ◆ Are there any staging techniques that are effective or interesting? Try and remember.
- ◆ What is the first thing you say about the play when it finishes?
- ◆ What positive things would you like to say to the actors if you had a chance?
- ◆ Think about questions you might ask the Director or Playwright.

AFTER THE THEATRE VISIT

The following comments, questions and activities are aimed at facilitating discussion, reflection and exploration of the play. It is not intended that they offer a definitive summary of major themes, but rather provide points of reference.

A. One of the recurring themes in *Stolen* is the concept of 'home'. Each character speaks about their home and their desire to be back in their home.

Following are some extracts from the play relating to the theme of 'home'.

Sandy: I carry me **home** with me.

Anne: This is my **home**.

Ruby: Don't need no **home** of me own.
Got enough to do.

Jimmy: I wanna go **home**.

Jimmy: waited for her to come and get me, take me **home**.

Ruby's dad: Ruby, we want to take you **home**.

Voices: Wake up
Come **home**
We're your mob
We're your mob
Come **home**, come **home**

Sandy: Been everywhere, except one place.
Chorus: **Home**.
Sandy: I'm going back.
Chorus: **Home**.
Sandy: Hey! I don't have to run anymore. Wooha! I'm going -
Chorus: **Home**.
Sandy: It's calling me
Chorus: **Home**.
Sandy: I don't have to hide. I'm going -
Chorus: **Home**.

B. The play also explores the negative aspects of the word 'home'. The home that the characters have been sent is not THEIR home; it belongs to someone else. There is also a strong sense of irony attached to the word home, particularly when talking about the children's home to which they have been sent.

Shirley: Not our homes Sandy, their **homes**.

Ruby: Don't live in no **home** any more. I work for the Hardwicks

Mother: We've given you everything – a **home**, an education, a future.

Sandy: No, not out of the slammer. Though it was kind of – the children's **home**.

Shirley: Jimmy, you don't want to go their **home** –

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ◆ How is the word 'home' used in the play? Is it just a place of residence?
- ◆ Why does the playwright use the word 'home' so often?
- ◆ The characters talk and fantasise about home. How did this talk affect you as an audience member?
- ◆ Why does the playwright also explore the negative aspects of the word 'home'.
- ◆ Is a child without a home homeless forever?
- ◆ Describe your own home. What emotions are attached to your home?
- ◆ Have you ever caught yourself saying 'I'm going home' when you are on holidays? What else makes a home?
- ◆ In groups devise a piece on leaving home voluntarily. Think about the emotions behind the decision and the affect these emotions have on you leaving. Next, devise a piece on being forcibly removed from your home. Again, think of the emotions. What are the different emotions in both pieces? What is the audience reaction to both pieces.
- ◆ Research songs and poems about 'home'.

- C. ***Stolen* is non-linear in structure.** This means that the play moves back and forward in time; the stories are not chronological. This structure enables the playwright to merge past and present and in so doing gives the audience the opportunity to see how the characters' present lives are intrinsically joined to their past. It also allows the characters to be suspended in time so their lives seem linked even though none of the characters were actually in the children's home at the same time.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ◆ Do you think that the non-linear structure is dramatically successful in *Stolen*? Why?
- ◆ What devices does the playwright use to give the audience information about each character? Why does the playwright do this? How does this style of writing effect your response to each character?
- ◆ Find a play with a linear structure. Compare and contrast this with *Stolen*?
- ◆ Make a written and pictorial time line of your life. Cut it up and play around with the order so it tells the reader something specific about you now.

D. In *Stolen* there are five different narratives. Each character has their own story even though they have all experienced living in a children's home and being taken from their families. The playwright was asked to use different stories and have characters react to their situation as an individual. Although the characters have a shared experience they each are affected in their own way. Her brief was to 'tell many stories and to not represent Kooris as homogenous people who all think, feel and react the same way'.

Jimmy gives up the fight and commits suicide.

'I'm going now, to be with my mother. I can't fight. I'm punched out.'

Ruby loses her sanity.

'Don't want no trouble' Ruby says as her family who have finally found her stand awkwardly while Ruby rocks and mutters to herself.

Shirley never gives up and is finally reunited with a new grandchild.

'Eh! I'm going to be a grandmother!'

Sandy finally decides to find his home.

'Hey! I don't have to run anymore.'

Anne is unsure and unresolved about which home she fits into.

'What about me? What do I want? I don't know. I don't know where I belong anymore ...'

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ◆ Why do you think the playwright was commissioned to write a play with many stories?
- ◆ If the play only contained one story, what would the audience know about the issues surrounding the Stolen Generations by the end of the play?
- ◆ What did you find out about the Stolen Generations from watching the five stories?
- ◆ Do you think the multiple narratives work dramatically? Why/Why not?
- ◆ Look at your group of friends. Look at the differences in upbringing, nationality, food likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. Is everyone the same? Create an incident that each of your friends has to be involved in. Write down each person's reaction. What did you discover?

- E. Although *Stolen* has a serious subject matter, **the playwright uses humour for dramatic effect**. The characters' recount amusing incidents about their lives and the playwright parodies well-known nursery rhymes and songs.

(This is sung to the tune of We're Happy Little Vegemites)

We're training to be doctors - no
We're training to be cooks - yes, yes
We're training to be engineers - no
Reading all our books - no, no, no
We're training to be cleaners - yes
And we'll earn much less
Because we love to work like slaves, we all adore to work like slaves. It puts a rose in every cheek.

We're training to be stockman - yes
We're training to fly planes - no, no, no
Training to be cleaners - yes
And we'll dig the drains - yes, yes, yes
Training to take washing in - yes
And we'll earn much less
Because we love to work like slaves, we all adore to work like slaves. It puts a rose in every cheek. It puts a rose in every cheek.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ◆ Why does the playwright use humour in the play?
- ◆ If you do not already know the meaning, look up the meaning of parody. Find some examples of parody in the newspaper, on television, on the radio.
- ◆ Why has the playwright chosen to parody *I'm a Happy Little Vegemite*?
- ◆ What is the playwright saying in her version of the song?
- ◆ In groups, choose a well-known advertisement and make up your own lyrics. Make sure the lyrics make a point. Present the song to the class.
- ◆ What were other humorous incidents in the play?

F. Two aboriginal stories are included in the play. Sandy is the only character who has had some of his culture handed on to him. He retells these stories to the other children. These stories highlight the fact that the other children are bereft of their own culture's stories. Their home is not the home where stories are handed down from generation to generation. The fact that Sandy is telling the stories also makes us aware of the importance of oral history to the aboriginal culture.

The story of the Mungee is a very powerful allegory which makes the audience realise the horror many children and families went through. It also provides a powerful message to the children about who should be feared.

The Story of the Mungee

The yurringa – that is the sun – shone all the time, day, and what we call night. The earth was very hot and in the dry season it would make all the waterholes dry up and the animals would have to travel to the south for water. One time it was so hot that there was no water and tucker was scarce. The burra all bounded away and the birds flew off in such a big flock that it turned the sky permanently black. Nobody minded because it was cooler in the dark. Until the Mungee came along. The Mungee was an outcast from the mob and he was mean and he was huge. He was so huge he used to eat a whole kangaroo tail by himself – every day. He was the best hunter and could sneak up on the barra drinking at the waterhold and snap its neck with his bare hands ...

Except when the big darkness came, there were no barra ... and no fish and no goanna's, cos they'd all moved on to other waterholes. The Mungee got so hungry that he came and snuck into his people's camp and stole one of the children! Then he ate him up! Munch, munch, munch –

- and he was gone! The next day he did the same. Under the cover of darkness he snuck in and stole another baby and ate him up. The mob were frightened and upset and crying. They tried hiding the children but the Mungee always found them. 'The Mungee's stealing our babies', they cried to the elders. 'What are we going to do? We can't catch him because we can't see him in the dark!' The elders thought about it and came up with a plan. They would cast a spell on him. The next day the elders waited for the Mungee, and when they sensed his presence they threw magic powdered bone all over him. It stuck in his hair and on his skin and he couldn't scrub it off. The Mungee was turned into a pale skin and that was his punishment. He would never be able to sneak into the camp to steal the children because he would be seen. And the people would know. And the people would never forget.

Sandy's speaks to Ruby at the end of the story and says:
'So Ruby ... remember, it's not the dark you need to be afraid of.'

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ◆ What makes the inclusion of the aboriginal stories important to the play?
- ◆ What makes the story of the Mungee such a powerful dramatic tool?
- ◆ Think about the other aboriginal story that Sandy tells. Why has the playwright included this story?
- ◆ Find some more Aboriginal stories. What do they tell us about our environment and about the Aboriginal culture?
- ◆ Why do cultures have their own stories?
- ◆ Find stories from another culture. What are the stories telling us about the culture and people?
- ◆ Tell a story from your own family history that has been passed down through generations.
- ◆ Research the word allegory.
- ◆ Dramatise one of the stories you have found.

G. SETTING

The playwright specifies in the script that the setting of the play should have five old iron institutional beds across the stage. The covers on the bed should be old, drab, chenille bedspreads, except for Anne's which is prettier. Each bed has a pillow. The only other props are a drab green metal filing cabinet and Holland blinds hung from the ceiling.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ◆ Did the setting of the production of *Stolen* you saw follow the playwright's instructions. Draw the stage plan.
- ◆ How effective was the setting of *Stolen*?
- ◆ What were the aspects that you found particularly effective?
- ◆ Why do you think this stage design was developed?
- ◆ What was the effect of the projected images?
- ◆ Did you notice anything about the lighting? Was it colourful? Was it stark? Why do you think this type of lighting was chosen?
- ◆ Experiment with projected images as an addition to your next performance piece. How did the images enhance your piece?
- ◆ If you have access to lighting, experiment with the moods created by different lighting – colours, white light.
- ◆ Develop an alternate set for *Stolen* for your school hall.

The playwright Jane Harrison said in an interview with the Melbourne Times (October 21, 1998) that she hoped she made a play accessible to all watchers white or black. 'What I wanted was to make an emotional connection' she says. 'I don't want people to think, 'that happened to black people'. I want them to think, 'that happened to people. How would I feel?'

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- ◆ Has the playwright succeeded in making her play accessible to all watchers?
- ◆ Has the playwright succeeded in making an emotional connection with the audience?
- ◆ How did you feel about what happened to the characters you watched on stage?
- ◆ Write a letter to the playwright explaining your reaction to the play and commenting on the positive aspects of the play.
- ◆ Write a review of the play for your local paper.
- ◆ Look back at what you wrote and discussed before your visit to see *Stolen*. Have your questions been answered about the Stolen Generations? Have your views changed at all?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission website:

www.hreoc.gov.au

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission website:

www.atsic.gov.au

Bringing them Home website:

www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen

Sorry Day website:

www.can.net.au/articles/sorry

Aboriginal Australia website:

www.aboriginalaustralia.com.au

Stolen Children and their Stories

Carmel Bird (Ed) Random House