



# Tyrel Dulvarie

## Where are you from (mob)?

I'm from *Gimuy* (Cairns) Far North Queensland. I also grew up in Innisfail. My mob are *Yirrganydji*, *Umpila*, *Kalkadoon* on my mother's side and *Djirrabul*, *Mamu* on my father's side.

## How are you connected to this place?

I began formal dance training here in Brisbane. I left Cairns straight after high school, along with my best friend. I was here from 2011-2013. It doesn't seem long, but they were 3 pivotal years of my life at the age of 18, 19 and 20. I was learning who I was, who I wanted to be and what I aspired to be.

Beginning my journey at Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (ACPA), I heard a lot about Mr Leslie and what his vision was for ACPA.

He was the kind of man who encouraged me to work hard, be disciplined and be versatile. I remember meeting him for the first time in Kangaroo Point studios and he made us all (the whole cohort) do push ups and sit ups before yarning with us.

Also, when I studied at ACPA I had the privilege of performing in a show directed by Leah Purcell.

Leah had strong, staunch, aunty vibes that meant you didn't want to muck around.

She was raw, tough and when it was time to work, it was time to work! But even with her sharpness she had a warmth that made you feel safe and comfortable to express yourself in the space.

As this was my first big show (performing at QPAC), I didn't have much time to work one on one with her (as I was a first-year student) but I would sit on the side or outside the door listening to the generous feedback she was giving to the other students and apply it to myself.

In this show I played one half of a curtain, and I remember her saying no matter what role you get, you be the best version of it, as your energy will make the whole picture come alive.

I made friends with the mob from ACPA, who naturally became family, as we all were having similar experiences being away from home, none to minimal formal training prior, studying the same thing, and spending each day training with one another.

With the little performing experience we had, it was pretty unreal to be thrown on stage in front of the Brisbane public, especially at QPAC each year. Being able to perform here has been an awesome opportunity. Truly grateful.

I moved away from Brisbane after those training years and after 7 years being away, I decided to move back to *Magan Djiri* (Brisbane).

A seed was planted here those many years ago, and things just started to grow from that.

That's how I'm connected to Brisbane.

## How did you become a storyteller? Why is this important to you?

None of us were trained when we got to ACPA but we all knew each other as actors and singers. We didn't have to explain everything. It was nice to have a home (like ACPA) to go to.

My *Bibi's* (aunties), always remind me that I was a storyteller as a young kid. They lived in Innisfail and Atherton, and they'd pick me up from Cairns on weekends or holidays. Apparently, I had a lot of gossip to fill them in on, and I'd proceed with the biggest story full in details. I'd be like, 'did you know this...' and go into detail. And they be like 'true, eh?'

I had a big imagination as a kid. Whenever we'd go on long car rides, camping trips, I'd be making up stories of what I'd see along the road.

I remember playing under the hose with Pokemon/Digimon in mind. I used to watch music videos and learn the routines and dance breaks.

My love for wrestling (WWF) began when I was a kid, and I'd be in the bedroom with my little brother and be like 'okay this is what's gonna happen, and we're gonna do this, and I'm gonna win, and you'll pretend to get hit by a chair'.

Coming into the performing arts consolidated the many creative ideas I had and that I could achieve all that in this world of the arts.

## What particular power does your artform bring to storytelling?

Being a professional dancer, I have the ability to not only articulate movement and shapes, but also to control emotional drive and connection to the body and mind. It kinda feels like a superpower.

## Is there a particular object, image or place that you cherish? Can you tell us why it's significant?

I keep a photo book with me, with photos of my family and friends. It reminds me of where I came from and who I'm doing it for.

I have photos of the kids (nieces and nephews) in there and hopefully they will get to see the journey I've been on and ignite a drive in them to chase their dreams and aspirations.

During tough times in life or rehearsals I often flick through [the album] to find motivation.

## Is there anyone in the performing arts that you looked up to or inspired you?

There are many artists I've met on this journey who have inspired me, such as Wesley Enoch, Penny Mullen, Narelle Benjamin, Amy Hollingsworth, the Page brothers, Leah Purcell, Waangenga Blanco, Sunday Lucia, Daniel Riley and so many others.

Also, when I was a kid, I became the biggest Beyoncé fan. I grew up watching her become one of the world's greatest performers. I would sit for hours listening to her music, watching her music videos, and reading about her life in the press. Not only was I captivated by her musical talents and dance moves, but I really appreciated her work ethic, drive and passion for everything she has achieved in her career and life.

I hope one day I'll get the opportunity to thank her in person.

## Biography

Tyrel has a strong love and value for culture, representation, diversity, fashion and the arts. He trained at the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (ACPA) from 2011-2013. He joined Ochre Contemporary Dance Company in Western Australia in 2014, and also performed in Penelope Mullen's *Danse Noir*. In 2015 he took part in Sydney Dance Company's Pre-Professional Program, before touring with *Hugh Jackman's Broadway to Oz* musical production.

Tyrel performed with Bangarra Dance Theatre from 2016-2021, initially as a recipient of the Russell Page Graduate Program. With Bangarra he toured productions *OUR land people stories*, *Bennelong*, *Terrain*, *Dark Emu* and *30 years of sixty five thousand* nationally and internationally with *Ochres*, *Spirit: a retrospective* and *Ibis* to the United States, France, Denmark, Germany, India, Japan and Canada.

Tyrel received the 2019 Australian Dance Award for Outstanding Performance by a Male Dancer in *30 years of sixty five thousand*.

In March 2021, Tyrel returned to *Magan Djin* (Brisbane) to join the Australasian Dance Collective, making his debut in *Succession*, the company's joint production with the Youth Ensemble. In May, he premiered the triple bill production *Three*, performing works by Melanie Lane *Alterum*, Jack Lister *Still Life* and Hofesh Shechter *Cult* and in September, Tyrel performed in Alisdair Macindoe and Josh Mu's *Forgery*, an artificially intelligent designed work where a computer feeds instructions to six ADC dancers live on stage.



Photographer Jo-Anne Driessens



# Leah Purcell

## Where are you from – your mob?

I am a proud *Guwa-Gunggari-Wakka Wakka Murri* woman. My bloodlines to Countries are *Guwa/Koa*, which is my grandfather's mother Country, and that is Winton. And *Gunggari* is my mother's mother's Country, the land that she was stolen from, and *Wakka Wakka* is where they all ended up, my place of birth and I guess I call it my spiritual home because it's the land that I personally know and connect with. I know the waterways there.

My mob are the Chambers family in Queensland.

## How are you connected to this place?

My relationship with Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) goes a long way back. My first experience with QPAC would be with *Box the Pony*, in 2000. In 1997, I co-wrote *Box the Pony* which was the smash hit of the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming. It had sell-out seasons at Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney Opera House, the 1999 Edinburgh Festival and the Barbican Theatre in London. The published text of the play won the 1999 NSW Premier's Literary Award.

So, I came home to Queensland (I had left at this stage and was living and working in Sydney) in 2000 to have a season at the Cremorne at QPAC. *Box the Pony* went on to win the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Play and I received the Matilda Award's QPAT Award for Excellence, an acknowledgment of my contribution towards the Arts.

It's a Queensland story of three generations of *Murri* women and that was important for me to come home and perform it for family and friends and to create an audience base in Brisbane.

I said to John Kotzas 'I need tickets for my family', and he said 'how many do you need?'

I said 'how many seats does the Cremorne hold?' And he said '253'. I said 'yeah that will do' and he nearly fell over!

So, we did a special performance for my family and that was important to do and deadily, then I went into the season at the Cremorne, which was well received.

The Cremorne Theatre is my special little space. I've done a few productions in that space. I've done *Box the Pony*, *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table* written by Wesley Enoch and all the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (ACPA) performances, from when I was the Artistic Director there from 2007-2011.

I had, and still have a beautiful relationship with QPAC. At my time as Artistic Director with ACPA, I asked if QPAC would come on board and support us with our end of year productions, so the students could get a real professional sense of what it was like to put on a professional production on a mainstage and reaching a wider audience, not just student's families.

QPAC was very supportive of ACPA during that time I was involved with the school. We put on great professional productions. The productions were written by myself and the students, bar one.

In June 2007, two major things were happening at ACPA – I was on board as the new Artistic Director and for the first time the whole school was coming together to perform on the Cremorne stage at QPAC.

They were working on *Reflections: Referendum 40 years and to the future* – my first show with them. This year was the 10th anniversary of ACPA, and the focus of *Reflections* was the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and the 50th anniversary of NAIDOC.

The other shows were *Q150 & Long Before*; *Something of a Midsummer Night's Dream-Time*; and *X-Stacy* to name a few, the final

one that I directed and was performed at the Cremorne was *Stolen* by Jane Harrison in November 2011. I utilised the ACPA students' multiple strengths to tell the play through dance, acting and song. It was pretty special.

On the students opening night for *Stolen*, I was having my own opening night for *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table* in Sydney, at the Griffin Theatre directed by Marion Potts. The students thought I was joking when I told them I couldn't be there. I rung them and I said, 'I told you mob I'm not there – I'm literally about to walk on stage in Sydney.'

It was a beautiful and very cool moment, they were about to do their opening night, and I was doing mine. It was important they saw their Artistic Director out there, doing the professional engagements in the industry; giving them something to aspire to.

My other big production for QPAC was *The Marriage of Figaro*, we opened the new Playhouse theatre in 1998. That production was all Queenslanders. Geoffrey Rush was Figaro, I was Susanna, Bille Brown was in it, Jennifer Flowers, David Sandford and Robyn Nevin – she was the Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre at the time. (*The Marriage of Figaro* was a Queensland Theatre and QPAC production).

Oh, I forgot *Black Chicks Talking*, that production played in the Playhouse, 2002. In 2010, Bain and I, with our then production company, Bungabura Productions, partnered with QPAC to bring *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table* home to the Cremorne. I directed that production with Queensland legend Roxanne McDonald who was in both productions with me, and Nathan Ramsay was in the Cremorne production with us.

For that production, we gutted the Cremorne so that we performed on the floor. Normally the stage is a proscenium arch but I asked them to get rid of the stage and if I could have a

semi-in-the-round space so people were right on stage with us. That was really interesting to change the figuration of the Cremorne, and it worked. I'm very blessed that Johnny Kotzas would do that for me, because it was such an intimate performance.

In 2010 *Cookie's Table* won a Silver Matilda Award – Leah Purcell for Best Female Actor in a Lead Role, and a Gold Matilda Award for her artistic direction of the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts and directing and acting in *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table*.

So, my relationship with QPAC was and still is great. I was very honored. I felt, and still feel very supported by QPAC. Hopefully, in the near future, I can come back to QPAC and bring home my play *The Drover's Wife* before I get too old and can't throw myself around! So, I would love to do that sooner rather than later.

### How did you become a storyteller?

Storytelling is in my DNA. I come from a long line of storytellers. I think if we could go way back into our ancestral ways; I think my family's job in the clan would be the storytellers. The keepers of stories. I've got uncles and aunts that would put Robin Williams, bless him and Whoopi Goldberg to shame, in delivering a punchline.

Uncle Ralphie Chambers, Aunty Sylvia Alberts! You walk away from a party with them two telling yarns, and you'll think you've gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson because your ribs and face are so sore from laughing.

And I was one of those generations where I was very privileged to have sat at their feet to listened and learn. Yeah, at times it was around a carton of XXXX when mob got together, but I wouldn't change those days at all. Because I was a very fortunate young girl to be around those adults, my family members in their prime telling those yarns. They would talk about traditional stuff and they would get political. I loved those days and I loved those stories. I miss those days.

My mum would have parties at her place in Perkins Street and I'd sit outside the kitchen door and they'd go 'ey! you supposed to be in bed' and I would look up at them and flutter my eyes, and next minute, I'm sitting on their lap in the kitchen enjoying the yarns and a singalong.

You know, I remember the laughter and the seriousness and the sorrow and the pain of the yarns, and the political things that they would talk about.

I felt very privileged, that's how I learnt to deliver a punchline through my ancestors, through my Elders. I didn't go to any acting school, apart from family, ya know where you sit down, and you listen and you learn and you earn your voice.

They're my influencers, my peers, it was the same with my music, when I had a little music career there for a time.

It started at an 8-week *Murri* music workshop at *Jagera* Arts Centre and it was with all my peers, Uncle Hedley Johnson, and cousin-brother Gary Coochie, Uncle Angus Rabbit, Uncle Robin O'Chin and other deadly *Murri* community musicians. It was family and I felt safe. I felt I could ask those questions where you might feel dumb if you were with *migloo* people. But it was family, and I knew them and they knew me.

And that's my humble beginnings into the industry, my foundation into the arts, influenced and supported by my talented *Murri* family and *Murri* community. And they were my first audience to, Musgrave Park launch of the *Sharing the Load* cassette tape!

### Why is storytelling important to you?

I dream up my projects. I use my mind to create and I put performers in situations in a space or in a frame or on a page.

And it's important for our mobs to be the storytellers because we're truth tellers for our People's plight. And it's important that I be that, that I use my voice, I use my performance ability to allow the truth to be told.

As we know our Aboriginal issues often have the lens of stereotypical mainstream media or a political agenda attached to them, but in the last 10-20 years our issues are being told from a more personal perspective because we're in positions now to have control of that narrative. We are all skilled up to tell our stories, with good support mechanisms in place, and from our many perspectives because of our diversity as a People.

### What particular power does your artform bring to storytelling?

In my process, I write about what I can personally connect with. I take an essence of my family's stories and loosely touch on them to create a strong and knowledgeable base of fact to build the story up from, then allowing fiction in to heighten the story.

So, I can draw my audience in because it's a 'good yarn with universal topics' that all audience members can relate to. But then find a way, like a Trojan horse, I guess, where the big story is one thing but inside there is all these First Nations issues in the undercurrent of the story. But it's always coming from a place of truth.

If someone said to me – Leah write a story that's about Stolen Generations, domestic violence, land rights – man I'd run a mile. But if you said, tell me that yarn about your

grandmother, tell me that yarn about your great grandfather, tell me that yarn, yeah, I can do that and then I'll let other people dissect what they want or analyse my work.

All I'm being is a truth teller, so that people can – I don't like to say educator, I like to say, I – bring about an understanding. I'm about giving a personal view into subjects that non-Indigenous people might not be able to connect with or know of. But more importantly to empower my People with our stories being on a main stage or in cinemas around the nation and the world.

And especially for our own younger generation, I learnt a lot when I was at ACPA. There was quite a lot of the younger ones there who were not aware of the plight of the Old People or how we got to where we are today from all the hard work and sacrifice of those who went before us, who they are as the First Nations of this land.

Just reminding them that 'you gotta get back and connect to story to find or have that strong blak foundation in your life, then can you prosper and move forward.'

That's what I believe because that's what got me to where I am today. Also, with the love and support from my *Murri* man, Bain Stewart, having my back and believing in my ability greatly helped as well.

I think it is important, to give permission to people to have their own voice. We all have stories and they're all important and need to be heard. If you can give a leg-up, a helping hand to mob to have that opportunity, whether it's a one off or they develop a career then that's imperative.

Because the industry is such a hard industry to sustain or even get a start in. And where I can, and I have given that opportunity to many, and I am very proud of that and their achievements knowing I have played a small part in their success, that's deadly.

Not everyone will reach the pinnacle of the industry but they can use their talents in other ways: self-esteem and confidence in their workplace, work in prisons; encourage them to tell their stories to help themselves on their journey of healing, become teachers to engage our young through the arts, drama and music. Us mob was born to perform!

The power of the arts is phenomenal, it can bring about change, it can bring about debate, it can encourage, it can reinforce. Storytelling and the arts are very powerful on many levels, it can save people's lives, it can turn people's thoughts around and bring about understanding; show another perspective of.

## Is there something, like an object or a routine that helps you to get ready for a show?

When I'm performing there are two photos I have with me, pinned on my mirror especially for theatre productions. A lot of effort goes into live performance, night after night. So, I have these two photos for grounding and protection, and strength and grace.

They are the Seven Sisters in the mountains on the western side of the South Burnett out at \**Ban Ban* Springs. Whenever I go home to Murgon I try to go out to *Ban Ban* Springs. Drink from the spring and sit quiet watching these mountains.

\**Ban* is a succulent grass – *Ban Ban* – is lots of it

When I was a little girl, when we would go see an uncle out at Mundubbera, mum'd go 'there's the Seven Sisters in them mountains there' and I'd go 'oh which one are you, mum?' Because she came from a family of seven sisters, I'd say 'that little fat one on the end!' You know! She'd tell me to knock it off but we'd have a little laugh, 'cause she was a little 'stumpy' stout one. Miss my mum, love her dearly.

So that photograph of the Seven Sisters Dreaming in the mountains is for grounding and protection. And the other photo was one my sister-cousin Jo-Anne Driessens sent me, it was a group of women painted up to dance, they were from our great grandmother's country, *Koa*, Winton, and I have that photo with me when I perform for their beauty, grace and strength!

When I did *The Drover's Wife* play, I had those women photographs there to pull strength from because I needed that strength for that particular role of Molly Johnson, and the mountains to 'earth' me.

So that's what I carry with me when I'm doing theatre, when I'm directing, and bugger me dead I've lost it too, I would have a little bunya (*bonyi*) nut in the pocket of my jacket. I would play with it like a stress ball.

And I bloomin' lost that jacket. True as God I was wild. It's not so much losing the jacket, although it did cost me \$300 but what I was wild about was my bunya nut! Ya know!

And it came from a tree at home there, too!

If I'd had that *bonyi* through the filming of my debut feature film: *The Drover's Wife – The Legend of Molly Johnson*, it would probably be as polished as a hardwood floor! That's my little go-tos! My good luck charms. I have to remember to get another stress relief bunya nut to put in my pocket!

And there's that spiritual connection to having those photos and that bunya nut with me, when I'm feeling tired or the weight of a project that I'm working on is getting to me, I look to them photos and take a deep breath, and I hold the *bonyi* in my hand – it makes it right... you know, things are going to be all right.

Before I go on stage, I touch 'em all, say a prayer and away I go. Ya gotta do what you gotta do! It's definitely about the spiritual connection for me though – not so much for luck, I think you create your own luck – it's just having the knowing and the energy of mind, heart and soul to become that character and go through all the performance necessities to deliver a deadly performance for my audience, and I've certainly done that for and at QPAC.

I have a lot of great memories working in the theatres of QPAC. And I hope to create some new ones in the future. *Ma* (thank you).

## Biography

Leah Purcell is a self-made author, playwright, actor, director, filmmaker, producer, screenwriter. After a difficult adolescence, Leah left Murgon and moved to Brisbane where she became involved with community theatre. Her prolific career took flight in 1993 with a role in Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Day*.

In 1997 she co-wrote and starred in *Box the Pony*, which played at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre, the Sydney Opera House, QPAC, the 1999 Edinburgh Festival and in 2000 at the Barbican Theatre in London. She wrote and directed the award-winning documentary film *Black Chicks Talking* (2021), which was subsequently presented at QPAC as a live theatre work.

In 2004, Purcell was invited to the United States for the three-month Eisenhower Fellowship. She was the first Indigenous person to be offered this opportunity. From 2007-2011 she was Director at the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (ACPA).

In 2016, Leah wrote and performed *The Drover's Wife*, winning 11 major awards for this work. It has since been published as a novel and adapted as an acclaimed film which premiered in 2021.

In 2021 she was awarded an Order of Australia – Member of the Order of Australia (AM) For significant service to the performing arts, to First Nations youth and culture, and to women.



Photographer Justine Walpole



# Michael Leslie

## Where are you from – your mob?

I am *Kamilaroi* on my dad's side. He is Lawrence John Leslie. I am *Manindanji* on my mum's side. She is Nola Raveneau.

We're from the Murray-Darling area and Moree is my home town.

## How are you connected to this place?

My story connects me to this place, through my family and my chosen career.

The Leslie Family have lived and worked here in Queensland since they opened up the Darling Downs and used the port here to transport goods. My family moved to where the work was. That's how I came to be here in Brisbane. I moved here when the Queensland Government asked me to come over in 1997 to create the first ever Aboriginal acting institution in Australia – the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA) which had a strong emphasis on musical theatre.

This story started in 1994, when Paul Keating invited me to be the Aboriginal member of National Cultural Policy (Creative Nation) advisory group. We travelled the breadth of Australia doing consultations about developing a 'Creative Nation'. For the first time Government highlighted the importance of the arts in people's daily lives, as our national identity. They wanted a cultural policy that focused on the economic potential of cultural activity as an employment avenue in film, radio, libraries and as export, innovation, marketing and design. Also, as part of this consultation process, I chaired the Federal Enquiry into Raising the Status of the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) as a national institution.

When we came to Brisbane we met with (Labour) Premier Wayne Goss and Arts Queensland and they asked to have the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing

arts training institution that we were proposing be built in Queensland. The community Elders argued that Queensland had lost many kids to NAISDA over the past 19 years (1975-94) and wanted to keep their kids and talent at home.

Then both governments changed. John Howard (Liberal) became Prime Minister and Rob Borbidge (National) became Queensland's Premier with Joan Sheldon as Deputy Premier, Treasurer and Minister for the Arts. Joan liked the concept of having a National Institute of Performing Arts (NIPA) and they travelled down to Sydney to discuss it and NAISDA joined in the fight. After a few trips to Perth to see me, the Queensland Government flew me over from Perth in 1997 to establish an organisation. Arts Queensland worked with me to develop the curriculum and recruitment and they acquired the Metro Arts Building in Edward Street [Brisbane CBD] for us. This already had studios with sprung dance floors.

The Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (ACPA) opened, with classes starting in 1998. We have always told stories through singing, acting and dancing and ACPA was created to give our kids the skills to take them into a career in modern storytelling and they had the skills to choose which career they wanted.

I believed it's essential for students to have three sets of skills to graduate, so we automatically transfer this to opportunities for employment in any or all three areas. If you're a singer you need to do music notation; an actor needs creative writing and a dancer should know choreography development. We have to pass on skills to our young ones.

My experience as a professional dancer taught me that it was important that training institutions like ACPA should give graduates the opportunity to have options other than dance to tell stories. I am happy to know that second generation performers are coming through ACPA and into the industry to tell new stories from a different era and perspective.

Partnerships and relationships are important to connect us to places, people and processes and discussions around the essentials such as – a singer should understand how songs are composed and the process of making music; an actor needs to know how to project their voice; the spatial layout of the set and how to move through it. So, we built a partnership with the Queensland Conservatorium of Music to facilitate this process and widen the influence of ACPA's three-pronged curriculum.

I am pleased to know that the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) offers ACPA space to showcase their graduation shows to family and friends giving them a professional space with specialist backstage crew. I aimed to have our kids on the main stage, to have a thorough understanding of the sector and to give them a higher chance of exceeding in the arts industry. We must give our young ones a wide arts vocabulary. Aboriginal people have to do it better than anyone else because we have to impress both sides – black and white.

It's good to hear that many of the kids working in and around the industry in Brisbane today are ACPA graduates who are now producers, playwrights and dramaturgs as well as actors, singers and dancers. This excellence gives distinction and equal opportunity. I am very proud they are following their dreams to tell their stories their way.

## How did you become a storyteller?

My story starts in 1975 when I and 4 other founding students set up the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Scheme (careers in dance) as a preliminary course. The other students were Dorethea Randall, Cheryl Stone, Wayne Nicol (deceased) and Daryl Williams, a cultural *Lardil* man from Mornington Island who taught us protocols. We toured NSW to recruit students for the 1976 program and in 1988 there was a name change to National

Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) Dance College.

In 1976 we established Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT), a semi-professional arm of the school which became a vibrant touring company. In 1977, we toured nationally, and our first international performance was at FESTAC 77, the 2nd World Black and African Arts and Cultural Festival in Lagos, Nigeria. We invited Lillian Crombie and Roslyn Watson (guest artist from Queensland Ballet) to perform with AIDT at FESTAC.

Being professional dancers on mainstages gave us a new platform, a unique way of telling our stories to new audiences. It raised the profile of Aboriginal dance on international stages and launched the careers of many dancers and performers.

In 1981, I was awarded the Churchill Fellowship to study at the Alvin Ailey Dance Centre in New York City. The following year I received the International Studying Grant from the Australia Council's Aboriginal Arts Board. From 1981 to 1983 I worked and studied in New York and graduated from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. This gave me another set of skills and another place to tell another set of stories.

My story changes in early 1988 when I went to Western Australia. I was teaching at Aboriginal Dance Development Unit within the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) when I was approached by Jimmy Chi to choreograph the original production of Broome-based *Bran Nue Dae*.

Jimmy Chi was a self-taught Aboriginal musician and composer from Broome who wrote some songs that were performed by a local band Kuckles, along with their own songs. The first public viewing of their musical theatre piece was as a work in progress at a workshop held by the Aboriginal Writers' Oral Literature and Dramatists' Association in 1986 in Perth.

When we began the initial development process, I identified the need for a training program to facilitate the production of the *Bran Nue Dae*. So, we established the first Aboriginal Musical Theatre training program in Western Australia to build the professional capacity of the cast and crew during the three months of rehearsals. The program delivered skills in theatre, singing, acting and dancing. This three-month Music Theatre program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students became the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) Aboriginal Performance course.

*Bran Nue Dae* premiered at the University of Western Australia's Octagon Theatre as part of the 1990 Festival of Perth. As Australia's first Aboriginal musical, it toured nationally during 1990-91.

The development process of *Bran Nue Dae* highlighted a need for an organisation in Western Australia to continue developing Aboriginal works. In 1991 I became the founder, associate director and resident Choreographer of Western Australia's Black Swan Theatre Company.

In 1993 Black Swan Theatre remounted the original *Bran Nue Dae* for a second tour in Melbourne and Perth and it broke all box office records for sales as a theatre musical.

*Bran Nue Dae* was a new process that started new careers for many of the cast and crew and created a new platform for telling our Aboriginal stories through musical theatre.

It initiated the first training program developed specifically for Aboriginal people. It was a seeding program that grew into the concept of ACPA.

Training is like a tree, with its roots holding it strong in country, like our ancestor stories keep us grounded in cultural; the trunk is the teacher, the students are the branches; the branches hold the flowers as ideas and their seed sets fruit and makes another tree. These new trees are the young ones coming through now, the new playwrights, dramaturgs, producers, actors and dancers. They are our arts family, telling stories that relate to each other and our histories, in our Country.

We, as Aboriginal professionals in the industry, must learn to give back to our community, to expand their careers. There are too many legacies out there being owned by people who are not passing on opportunities to our own community.

We need to move over and let these young ones take up those important positions and we have to make sure it's a safe industry for our young ones to work in as well.

After *Bran Nue Dae*, I was employed by some major theatre companies as a choreographer. I directed Jack Davis' Play *Wahngin Country* for Black Swan Theatre. '*Wahngin Country*' – 'talking about my country', opened at the Festival of Perth in 1992. The premiere performance was a one-man show, with Stephen Albert (Baamba) playing an Aboriginal fringe dweller who talked about his country and who lived at Miller's Cave, an encampment near Perth. It covers a day in the life of this eccentric old man who is modelled on an eccentric, whom Davis knew, and who did live at Miller's Cave. Davis' play is based on his observations and on history passed down to him by his parents, but the reality is filtered through 'the frames of Davis' fiction and memory.

*Mimi* was an original concept of mine and was developed in collaboration with Stalker Theatre who were known worldwide for acrobatic dancing on stilts. It was commissioned by the Festival of Perth to premiere in 1996.

The production of *Mimi* comes from *Gunbalanya*, Western Arnhem Land and based on the stories of *Kunwinjku* painter and storyman Thompson Yulidjirri and the *Karrparra* song cycle of *Kunwinjku* songman Bruce Nabegeyo. The production was co-devised by *Kunwinjku* storytellers, musicians and dancers, the West Australian Aboriginal dancers that I brought to the project and the physical theatre performers from Stalker Theatre.

This was not a 'fly-by-night', short-term idea or project. This was about vision – a long-term vision for our people: having a physical theatre company that was multidisciplinary, cross-cultural and site-specific (the term back then was 'hybrid'). When I say 'physical' and 'site-specific', I'm invoking the meaning of physically interconnected with the landscape of our stories. This was not always on stilts; this is more about connection to Country and why all performances have to be elevated to professional theatre.

Stalker Theatre had to work within a different culture; with specific protocols that protected their sacred values; with issues that had to be addressed before we could produce a story like *Mimi* for presentation to the wider community. It took a lot of work as it was drawn from someone else's story. It involved specific process to undertake this type of work on country as well as respecting the sacredness of the story.

*Marrugeku* was born out of that multidisciplinary, cross-cultural and site-specific process that created the *Mimi* 'story'. It was co-founded in 1994 by myself, the director, and a large group of artists from diverse backgrounds. This name was given to the Company by *Kunwinjku* traditional owner Jacob Nayinggul on whose country we created our first works. It is a *Kunwinjku* language word and now has changed to reflect its correct origin – *Marrkidjbu* 'Clever Men'. Since then, it has grown and changed, creating long-term intercultural projects in remote and small-town Indigenous communities.

In 2003 *Marrugeku* shifted its base to Broome in WA, home of several founding company members. It is now the organisation that builds bridges and breaks down walls between urban and remote dance communities, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and between local and global situations.

*Marrugeku* and the making of *Mimi* pioneered a contemporary, process-driven, intercultural performance practice. *Mimi*'s exposure in national and international arts festivals has had a significant impact on raising awareness of our Aboriginal culture.

It is all of the above processes that enabled me to move from dancing to story-telling with skills that allows me to tell a story's that may not be mine to tell.

Now I've been told that what I do is creative choreography.

This skill came out of all of my work, creating a platform that is useful to know. I passed it on through my work and in creating companies like Black Swan and ACPA.

We as professionals, must never be gate keepers. The arts are part of our sharing and caring culture, even though a small number keep it close.

All these platforms allow me to tell my stories through collaboration. I now have a broader vocabulary to tell my stories with but I don't have blinkers on. I look at my experiences and shape it from there.

Now, as I get older in my career, I want to do performance art.

I like trying different genres. I've utilised and taught three different styles in my career of 24 years: Dance for my Masters; choreography to do *Mimi*; and now directing in *2.5*. In 2018, as a dancer and choreographer, I developed *3.3* which was presented by Ochre Dance Contemporary Dance Company at Subiaco Arts Centre, Perth in 2018.

Our new ones coming through as young professionals now need all these diverse platforms.

My thesis, *2.5' – Rite of Passage*, was performed in a prison cell. The cell is the art with dance/theatre as performance. The cell was the tool to show the rites of passage as incarceration is making the man now. This is not our traditional practice. That was taken away from us.

*2.5* began with the examination of institutional and widespread incarceration of my people and explores this as an alternative rite of passage for young men. Even though we are presumably living in the age of post-colonialism, the effects and attitudes towards Aboriginal people are still very much in tune with those of two centuries ago.

My project is autobiographical for two reasons. First, I felt this history on my body. I witnessed friends and relatives as subjects of this history. This is still continuing, tucked away from the spotlight of media and public interest.

Second, I cannot remove myself from this history and attempt to write an objective account. I feel that I am still living this history every day. Because of this, my experience in dance enables me to express this history through movement of my body. But even learning how to be a dancer is connected to racism. In this way, for me to dance is to perform this history, to narrate the events of my life and the heritage of my people.

But the work is about more than simply making people aware of these acts of murder and

subsequent lack of justice, adds Howett. [Ochre Contemporary Dance Company artistic director Mark Howett] 'It's also about healing. Even though we ask hard questions, we're trying to open up a topic enough so that people can discuss it and they can recover from it. There's a chance for healing by showing the hardest part of one's life.'

The performance title *2.5*, is a seemingly meaningless number but it is the translation of my people into a numeric, a statistic, a measurement by Western standards. We, Aboriginal people, are the invisible minority in this country.

We are the *2.5*. The show addresses the history of institutional racism in Australia. It looks at the way attitudes from early colonial history – seen in events such as the Myall Creek Massacre – have been passed down and incorporated into attitudes towards Aboriginal people. In particular, I am interested in how my people, *Kamilaroi* people, have been subjected to racism.

It is not a history of colonial Australia. It is a story about how this history affects my people and manifests itself on my body. This is a story of how the history of colonialism is mapped onto my body and the histories that establish the background to my study; it is a subjective account. It needs to be, because my life has been marked by racism on my body. I am unable to escape this history, or live outside of it because the institutional racism in Australia will not let me.

The approach taken, combines historical research with my own personal history: me as a dancer, an Aboriginal man, and an outsider in my own country.

This position of alienation is central: feeling like I am a part of something, yet removed from it at the same time. This is reflected in the methodological approach I took. I tell stories, I attempt to write them down and put them on paper, yet I always feel like that will not capture my experience somehow. Words never seem to do justice to what I feel and think. Yet, I feel the urge to express myself because history keeps coming back.

The methodology explores a historical survey of colonial history in Australia, an overview of dancing techniques that have influenced me (including key practitioners), and a plan of the key steps of my performance.

*Reclaiming Language Through Movement: 3.3*. (100 dance steps – *Gamilaraay* language)

'Part of healing is about reclaiming language through movement. There was a law called linguicide, where it was forbidden for my people to speak their language and if they did, they'd be thrown in gaol,' says Leslie. 'That added to the demise of people speaking language. So

when I did my master's, I looked at creating 100 dance steps from the *Gamilaraay* language. This was not only an artistic reclamation of language but a political act against linguicide.'

Those 100 dance steps, based on the rhythms and meanings of words from *Gamilaraay* language, form the basis of the choreography for *3.3*.

'I did a reclamation of my language, of my culture, to create what I've created in the cell there,' explains Leslie. 'So every word that I chose, there had to be something where I could create a step.'

Like the word '*Muti*', which means lightning, that's a tour (a jump that turns in the air) ... quick, like lightning. Or '*barurra*', the word for a red kangaroo, the anatomical characteristics of the kangaroo have inspired this contemporary movement: staunch and powerful with muscular shoulders and elongated torso ... very intimidating when threatened. Even being sick, there's this impulse, we say '*wiibi-li*', so I used that rhythm, those three beats, and did a movement like this' – Leslie's torso ripples as though something is propelling upwards and out. 'So it's all very contemporary. They're not cultural steps because I haven't been trained in cultural dance. My style comes from the athleticism of the training I've had in African-American contemporary dance. So I've drawn from the rhythm and meaning of *Gamilaraay* language to create these steps.'

23 May 2018, Nina Levy 'Reclaiming language through dance' *SeeSaw Magazine*  
<https://www.seesawmag.com.au/2018/05/reclaiming-language-through-dance>

This is my story....

## Why is your story important to you?

Because as artists, we all have a story to tell, maybe it's not about us but it comes out of our thought process.

It is important that all of our stories need to be political! Art is activism, we need to tell the stories that have to be told. Artists are analytical and creative! We take risks. We approach things differently.

We need to use the vocabulary and experience we have to tell them.

## What particular power does your artform bring to storytelling?

Reality is a power. We have the power to tell the 'real' stories, the ones that are hard to tell. We need to tell them in musicals with more laughter, like laughing in the face of adversity.

Power comes with knowledge. Informed activists have a responsibility to tell the stories of the wrongs and injustices.

Tell what happened on country, to families, the real story!

But not in drama. Story telling starts with training our young ones how to tell powerful stories.

Power comes from me setting up an institution that gives students three skills and the necessary skills as creatives to take the whole industry forward. My dream empowered these young ones to step up and tell their stories in their way.

There needs to be a 'left turn' in how we tell our stories in a contemporary way.

Some of us can't bring back our language so we need to tell it our way; show the reflection of life of our people in our theatre works; use mainstream to help us tell stories;

### **Is there a particular object, image or place that you cherish?**

First, I cherish my connection to family, community and Country; my home!

The beauty of the experience of culture! Where my inspiration comes from.

Second, in the 70's I cherished the arts and activism and its inspirations.

### **Can you tell us why it's significant?**

I think we, as aboriginal artists, have a responsibility to be political and tell those important stories in theatre, dance and song – to the world.

### **Biography**

At the age of 19 Michael Leslie commenced dance classes at the Bodenwieser Dance Centre in Sydney.

In 1975, Michael and 4 other students found they needed a structured training process and created a National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Scheme (careers in dance). This group toured NSW recruiting students for the 1976 program. In 1988 the name changed to National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) Dance College. In 1976 the group established Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT), a semi-professional arm of NAISDA which became a vibrant touring company.

The company toured nationally in 1977 and their first international performance was at FESTAC 77, the 2nd World Black and African Arts and Cultural Festival in Lagos, Nigeria. Two professional Aboriginal dancers, Lillian Crombie

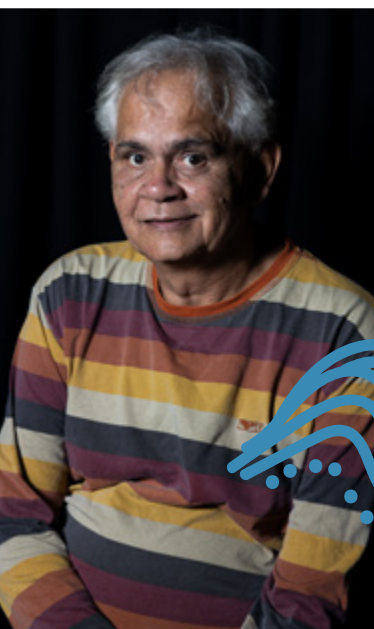
and Roslyn Watson, (Queensland Ballet) were invited to perform with AIDT at FESTAC 77.

In 1981, a Churchill Fellowship supported study at the Alvin Ailey Dance Centre in New York. Upon returning to Australia Michael settled in Perth. In 1990-91, while choreographing Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae*, he, along with students and staff, co-founded the first Aboriginal Musical Theatre training program. In 1994 he began creating his own ground-breaking works, notably *Mimi* which premiered in 1996. From 1997 – 2001 Michael was founding Director of the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA).

He has recently formed the Michael Leslie Foundation for the Performing Arts. Through this national program, he hopes to teach and inspire children and young people to gain self-respect and pride through the arts and help them overcome



Photographer James Brickwood  
Sydney Morning Herald



# Lafe Charlton

## Where are you from – your mob?

I am from *Go'enpul* and *Djandewal* of *Yagarabul* country and *Tjerangeri* (Stradbroke Islands), *Quandamooka* (Moreton Bay), *Ngunda/Undambi*, *Kabi* (northern neighbour) and *Walangama* of (North Queensland). We're *Wakka Wakka* and *Bundjalung* people too, those bloodlines as well.

## How are you connected to this place?

One of my earliest recollections of the ground that QPAC is on is back in the 70's or late 60's. We used to live in a boarding house, probably where the bus stop is at GOMA. And just down the road in Melbourne Street, there was the Born Free Club. Born Free was a hangout for *Murris*. There was a pool table in there. Activists would come in there and artists of the time would come in there and they actually got a few international sports people and black artists of the time that came in there to hang out. In 1973 The Jackson 5 popped over there and checked the place out. [The Jackson 5 was the first ever black pop group to tour Australia. Brisbane's Festival Hall was their first stop and they visited the Born Free Club, located where QPAC now sits.] And then years later, well it all changed, slowly but surely. Then the Cultural Centre was built [in 1985].

In 1988 I worked on Expo 88, in South Bank near the Australian Pavilion. And watched the fireworks from the roof at QPAC. Felt like a celebrity myself at the time!

I should go back just a little further. There was black theatre back in the 60's and 70's. I don't think they had a name, they just called themselves 'Black Theatre'. And then there was a resurgence of that. Roxy [Roxanne McDonald] and I did an acting course together at the Queensland Acting Film and Television College in the city and then things started happening.

When Expo finished in October '88. I went for a job interview at Contact Youth Theatre with Michael and Ludmilla Doneman. I got the job so that's where my background in youth theatre started. We developed the *Murri* program and had a number of young ones. I started with family first to get the numbers going and then it grew from there. Our office was in QPAC actually, on the museum side. We had in-kind support from QPAC. The trustees of the Cultural Centre gave us a space in there for our office before we moved to Metro Arts in the city. So, as much as it was criticised and everything over the decades, QPAC has, I think, played a role in the development of theatre and performing arts in the city and in the state.

It's still out of reach of community artists because it's such a major infrastructure and it's expensive and all the rest of it. It's unaffordable for a lot of community theatre companies.

I remember them going through a consultation program in the late 80's/early 90's and this was 'we will make it more accessible for the community to use' and then they made the Playhouse. And you know the community can't access that. They don't make shows that command those sorts of audiences. There was a bit of fallout about that.

But there's been some dedicated people who are still at QPAC, Johnny Kotzas is one. He's played a major role in making opportunities available for various cultural groups to access that space and various rooms within QPAC. I have a lot of appreciation for John because he's helped a couple of the productions and companies that I have worked with over the years. He's always been a good supporter and he's open to innovation and he's not afraid of his critics, which is good. When I say critics, I mean the funding bodies or whatever, so I just think that's important.

Of course, I've performed on some of the stages in QPAC, but I think the satisfaction for me was working with young people and helping them to move up through the ranks and be the next generation of actors, performers, facilitators, cultural facilitators.

In my 6 years at Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (ACPA), QPAC was a great support. I established a link between QPAC and ACPA back in my time so when the students did their graduation show at the end of each year, they had a mainstage, which gave them that firsthand, intense experience of performing on a mainstage in an institution like QPAC.

We've seen ACPA students go on to greater things over the years now and they're continuing to do that. Unfortunately, COVID put the strangle hold on various things in the field but that was very important for ACPA to have that connection with QPAC.

And then *Kooemba Jdarra* [Indigenous Performing Arts Company] over the years has accessed theatres within QPAC. So QPAC has been quite fruitful for the industry or quite successful in playing its part in Queensland theatre.

In stories of old, we were told as kids, that that whole area of South Bank was a meeting place. Because the river's not so wide and the current's not so strong here, and around towards the Story Bridge the river narrows, it was easy to cross.

So, it's funny you know, that there has been recorded evidence that there were gatherings for up to 10,000 blak fellas there, pre-colonisation. That goes back to the Spirit of the Land. That Spirit still remains in the land and then 100 years later, what happens? Another mob comes along and turns it into a 'world stage' for Expo, where it again is turned into a big gathering spot.

That Spirit never really goes away, it's there, it's just listening to the land and then it takes the reins of determining what eventuates in that place. That's where blak fellas have the connection to the land and that spirit of the land that runs through our blood and our DNA. There's also like a vibration that we feel with the land and that whole area there is still the same, it's still vibrating that need.

South Bank's there now which is a big gathering place so that vibration is still having an effect on the population.

That energy source, whether it's Spirit, an invisible energy or a metaphysical energy that's coming from out of the land, it's still there, it's just whether people listen to it. And for me, I'll be long gone but this is what's gonna play out with climate change over the next few decades. Which is another issue again, but that's gonna be the big one and that's gonna make COVID look insignificant.

### **How did you become a storyteller and why is it important to you?**

As a child on Stradbroke Island [*Minjerribah*, North Stradbroke Island], sitting around the fire, there'd be guitars going, spoons, harmonica, aunties would be singing. Us as kids, I'm saying 4 or 5 year olds, we were just sitting there. I was mesmerised by them and as I grew – no TV back then or anything like that – this was our entertainment. We made entertainment in the bush – spears, shanghaies, lassos, whatever – and then this part of it was to see different relatives, aunties and uncles, grand aunties and uncles.

For me, I think this played a significant role for my career moving towards the arts over a period of time. Then we moved here, where the GOMA bus stop is now, to a boarding house there on Grey Street, I ended up going to West End Primary School, so I had that connection at an early age to this area as well. Aunties and uncles used to also sit down at what used to be called Manhattan Walk, which is roughly around the space – it was grassy – between the Playhouse and the ABC, that strip there, but it was a bit wider. The *Murris* used to sit there, not always drinking, some were dressed up – you know. ... you look back at old photos from the '30s- '50s, and them old people had suit, tie, nice dress, respectable.

That was around the 30's-50's. Not so much the 60's, but in certain situations. The further you go back with the Aboriginal League [One People of Australia League (OPAL)], you know, them Old People, you'd see them all standing around holding the banner they had, they've got suits on, nice dresses, floral hats and everything. They took a lot of pride in how they looked.

Anyways, those little things around the campfire inspired me from an early age. Then I came to West End Primary School, and I remember on my first day, the teacher said, 'this our new boy – Lafe' and then she proceeded to say 'can you sing? Because we get someone to sing in the morning in front of the class'. I went out on a limb and said, 'I know one song'. Because my older sister Donna Ruska, when I was a kid, she said you need to know one song all the way through, you can't just sing the chorus. So she taught us *Train Whistle Blowing – out along the bay* – you know that one. And that's what I did, got out in front of the class. All the other kids clapping, because they would be hearing hymns and other things and this song was on the radio back then.

That inspired me and then after a few years of moving around to different places we got a housing commission house. All that time there were little influences for me, for the arts, whether it was painting or doing stuff with my hands. So, we got a housing commission house in Inala, and I went to Inala West, and I went to Inala High and me and this white fella, Shane, we got to sing a song in the high school talent competition. We made it to the finals. There were two preliminary concerts or whatever, and from those you were picked for the finals which was at Elizabeth Bruce Hall. Every year the seniors always won the final, but we didn't get any placing at all.

Then I joined an amateur theatre group, the Inala Theatrical Society, at 17, and that saved my life in some ways, because I saw a lot of my friends who didn't spend their two nights a week and then Friday-Saturday doing a show – amateur theatre – they'd be out on the charge or whatever. Over the years I watched – I wasn't being judgemental or anything – I just was observant of how our lives changed direction. Mine changed direction towards the arts.

Then I moved out. Mum passed away; that's why I say the amateur theatre company saved my life because I could have easily turned to drugs and alcohol and been a completely different person today. But that discipline of theatre helped me deal with my mum passing away at a young age, being a single parent, and everything. That helped me keep some sort of sensibility in my life.

### **What particular power does your artform bring to storytelling?**

It doesn't matter what culture you come from, storytelling has always been a part of the evolution of a culture. To pass on a story, whether it's facts or stories to stimulate the imagination, stories of certain things in nature to give signals or food sources or just to watch your health and wellbeing, stories have always played a part in various elements of life for many cultures.

And fortunately, our stories are the oldest stories on the planet. We've got stories that go back 50-60,000 years. So they painted them, and they had stories to go with that painting. Our people on Straddie (*Minjerribah*, North Stradbroke Island) date back to 15-16,000 years when the island separated from the mainland. The middens over there have evidence that we've been there for something like 16,000 years.

My grandfather Alfie Moreton, his father Mookin Charlie Moreton, his father Dandrubin, and his father Kerwallie, we go back eight generations. We can go back to 1830 when the old people were born there and there's a record of them. For us that's important, it's part of our identity and our strength. We try to, in whatever way we can, pass that knowledge through story onto our kids and hopefully they will pass some of those stories onto their kids.

When my grandfather used to tell us a story, he'd say 'oh you won't understand this story now, but when you get feathers and you're running around teenagers, you will remember this story and you'll understand it'. And, sure enough when we became teenagers and were restless and that sort of stuff, you would remember a character from a story and think 'oh that could be me' and think 'oh I'm not gonna follow those same footsteps as that character in that story'. So, there's lessons to be learnt in those stories. And working in theatre, producing theatre, with young people and then professionals, that storytelling continues on, and it has changed the lives of a number of people in the audience, educated people, given people a different perspective on things. Those stories inspire young people to strive for better than what their parents were dealt. It's human instinct not just a *Murri* thing.

### **Do you have something that you cherish?**

I have never really attached myself to a single thing. For me it's more the memories and for me its family. Family for me is the sacred object that I wanna care for and hopefully they will have that same thing that's precious.

I'm a grandfather now, so that little granddaughter is my focus and she's my cherished one, along with my children of course. But family for me is the 'thing'. I've had many things along the way, objects, you know I've got crystals that I've had since I was in my 20's. ... old photos. I've noticed lately when I see photos of my Old People, my aunties and uncles, like the last of them passed away about 10 years ago, and all these memories come flooding back, about the interaction with them. And I thought for a moment, these are so special, you know those memories. Those photos of those people, you look at the photo

and expect them to knock on the door, walk through the door, the memory is so fresh.

And I always say to nieces, nephews and my kids, 'don't underestimate the power of the spirit of the old people'. Because society puts so much emphasis on something that is so far removed from us, whereas we have all these significant people that come in and out of our life and their spirit still lives on. And for me, that spirit is real. I pray to my mum, my grandparents – those people that loved me when they were still alive. I know they're still there, just on the other side and they're the ones I pray to. And over my lifetime, I pray to them for certain things, nothing too outlandish and I put at the end of my prayer 'only if I deserve it'.

And you know what, they've answered! I've got some of the things, not all of it but I've got some of the things I've actually prayed for, over years and years of praying for those same things. So don't underestimate the power of the spirit of the Old People. They're there. They're not far away.

## Biography

Lafe Charlton is an award-winning actor, director, designer, producer and tutor. He has toured First Nations communities and performed for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Expo 88. His strong and purposeful commitment to First Nations community theatre has for decades sat alongside his work with many mainstage companies in Australia. He has also performed numerous roles for film and television.

During the 1980s, Lafe was the *Murri* Programs Coordinator with Contact Youth Theatre. In the early 1990s he was instrumental in establishing *Kooemba Jdarra* Indigenous Performing Arts Company, however Contact remained his focus for many years, and he helped to develop it into one of the key community-based arts organisations in the country.

In 1997 Lafe followed Wesley Enoch as Artistic Director of *Kooemba Jdarra* and from 2001 – 2006 he was Director of the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA) taking over from its founder, Michael Leslie.

In 2003, Lafe was awarded the Sidney Myer Indigenous Facilitators Prize for his 15 year contribution to developing Indigenous Performing Arts in Queensland

During his career he has been a mentor to many up-and-coming First Nations artists.



Photographer Jo-Anne Driessens



# Fred Leone

## Where are you from – your mob?

I'm a *Garawa* (SW Gulf of Carpentaria), *Butchulla* (*K'Gari*, Fraser Island) man with links to Tonga, Gela and Tanna Islands. I grew up as part of the Brisbane blacks, in Brisbane.

## How are you connected to this place?

I remember being little, going to Musgrave Park and around West End in the mid to late 80s, cruising around and going to all the little *Murri* Dances and Blue Light Discos, and bingo. They used to put on little bingo things, you know for the oldies, so we would get into the bingo and hang out and see all the family.

I never expected to be working in spaces like QPAC. I didn't expect to live past 20-something, because of the narrative of the schools I went to and the police I'd have run ins with! For no reason, just for getting milk at the shop or walking to school. Just doing nothing.

The narrative they spun to you was 'you're just gonna be dead, you're not gonna be anything, you gonna do this, you gonna do that'. I thought I'd be dead and that's a lot of blak fellas living in low socioeconomic areas. They sort of know! There was nothing!

The thing that did help me, the only things I'd go to school for was dancing (shake-a-leg) and basketball. That was the only two things I'd go to school for – dance or basketball practice!

## How did you become a storyteller?

Music! It was an outlet, to get things off my chest. Rap was easy because you didn't need cash. Someone could beatbox and you just rap. It was good! You could get things out of your head. And listening to lots of Rap!

And, growing up listening to Bob Marley and Charley Pride, Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton! Mum

and dad would just play their record player all the time. In the summer, they'd put us to sleep on the hardwood floor with a blanket and the fan goin', just playing music and we would just crash.

That's how I got into music. That's how I got into storytelling, from hearing stories! Then went to writing music but instead of just writing, you know, the fun, poppy stuff – couldn't do it – because everything was coming out as a story automatically, from listening to all that storytelling. Even the rappers like Nas, Tupac and Public Enemy, were telling stories so that's just what you do.

## Why is storytelling important to you?

It was hard to leave [Brisbane] and why I keep coming back – is just all the memories of being little and sitting around hearing all these old girls talking from different mob like 'I'm *Kullali* mob'. Playing with their grandkids.

My mum's there and we're all playing together, talking and listening to them old girls all the time. Eavesdropping! Listening to them talk about whose got what from where. You know, this one's got this and that: 'one woman from up here she's got this little *Jundjardi*'; 'this one's got a little rock and she use it when she plays cards – that's how she always wins all the money'. All these little stories and you're like goin' 'heh?'

Just watching and listening, hanging around old people all the time and that's what I miss.

Like when I'm walking around West End, I go 'oh Whynot Street!'. I remember going to Whynot Street from like 3 'til 8 or 12 [years old], watching mum play cards there for the day – Inala, the Valley, Alfred Street Bingo. There was always just lots of blak fellas everywhere, ya know, all the time. It's different, Brisbane is

a big town but it's a country town, cause when you walk along, doesn't matter where, you're gonna bump into someone you know, that's what I love.

You know, I never thought I'd have a band like Impossible Odds, or be running a record label. Its real weird cause that came out of necessity, like having to because no one would pick up the music. They would say 'what's Indigenous hip hop, what is it? Isn't it just hip hop?' Well yeah! but I'm blak, so it's Indigenous hip hop and they'd be like 'ohhhh okay!' They just couldn't wrap their head around it, the mainstream music mob.

And now blak fellas are everywhere and signed to major labels and crazy stuff, even independent! We're just rocking it out! It's not even a thing now, you know! We're there! Three generations of hip hop!

## What particular power does your artform bring to storytelling?

The cultural stuff! That's what kept me going, performing traditional dances at community events. Cause you felt like it was ya little superpower and no white fulla can take it away from ya. Because you do this dance from here, that song from there! You'd sit down and have these little yarns with other *Gooris*. . . others ask 'what are you talking about?' Ya go, 'nothin'! You will never understand'.

I made a promise to myself, the only time I get painted up is when I go up the Gulf or my grandmother's country up Hervey Bay, *K' Gari* or Maryborough.

I haven't danced in ages but I've been singing heaps and learning from my grandfather's side, learning *Kujika*, learning 280 verses for one proper songline for our clan. *Mambaliya*.

That's just for my half of the clan. And there's bottom side, top side for our clan though. And I feel all the traditional songs that I learnt growing up, it was getting me ready, getting my head ready.

All those times when I got to sit with old people and just listen and talk, listening to my brothers singing and talking when I was younger, and it was all sorta getting me ready for when I eventually went up.

I'd been going home heaps, going up to my grandfather's country in the Gulf, but when they started teaching me *Kujika* it just opened and give me a whole 'nother way of thinking about Country and then going through it changed everything, like a light flicked, or a switch flicked.

Somebody asked me 'oh what's the difference between normal song or one of them other songs ya sing, than that one songline – *Kujika*?' I said 'this is heavy lifting, like this is proper heavy lifting', and it wrecks you, you just get exhausted.

Because you gotta memorise everything, where it is, you gotta know so many different things about each verse. the power that drives me is that I've been feeling like there's an urgency, and it's been like that for about 15-20 years. And as I get older the more I realise that my aunties and uncles started dropping in their 40s and late 30s, all the way through 40s-50s.

So I'm feeling it now. I'm 7 years off 50! Every year is just getting more urgent. That urgency, that's just pushing me, I think. And knowing that all these old people fought for us to be to do what we do, even to be able to go and do gigs.

There's all these different levels to it, so making sure you respect every single old person who taught you something along the way cause it's all relevant to being who you are now in 2022.

## **Is there something, like an object or a routine that helps you to get ready for a show?**

Yeah, I had to teach myself how to meditate. It was stressful. I loved it, I love getting on stage but everything from the day before to getting on the stage – I'd have cramps and sweating. Yeah, it's different now because I don't get as nervous. Oh! I still get nervous but it's weird now because I have been performing for so long it's like second nature now. I'm like 'come on, get out there, rock it out there'. I'll get a bit nervous and do a couple of things like I start stretching and that gets rid of it.

## **Is there any show or community event that you specifically remember around Brisbane from anytime in your life that has just really stayed with you?**

*Stylin' Up* was the first and only Indigenous Hip Hop festival in Australia – it was epic every time! All those months leading up to it and then the day would come and you would rock up to the park there on the oval and just like 'ohhh here it is'. But it was just really good, it was something I really looked forward to. That was the highlight for me. And then everyone be like 'What you doin' for *Stylin' Up* this year? like, performance wise?' 'Uh nothing...' just quietly trying to out-do each other.

It pushed everybody. Cause they're like 'I'm not rockin' up on that day with a half-ass set, I'm getting my A-game on'. We're just rehearsing, rehearsing, rehearsing and just rock it out. Cause there's 9-12,000 people watching you. And it was most of the day, even the dance stage was just packed. Then they had to have different dance stages, that's when we knew it was getting huge.

With hip hop there's so much compared to any other music. If you look at any average rock song, the amount of lyrics in it, compared to rap – it's a lot to remember. And the technique, the 'breathing' – it takes years and years to be able to get fit on stage – to be able to do it.

If you've got a blocked nose, you're finding every way you can just to unblock it 'cause it can hamper your delivery. You can't stuff it up. People who know, they'll be watching, and you can tell when someone is about to stuff up because they'll miss a breath and you're like 'oh you should've had that breath there!'

Funny, I don't get anxious doing traditional song – when I'm singing songs and lingo, I'm not even nervous at all!

## **Biography**

Fred Leone has performed traditional dance with family and extended family since he was 5 years old. Now a cultural leader and First Nations advocate, he commits to passing on the cultural knowledge of his ancestors to younger generations through traditional songs and dances as a senior song man.

Fred works across the Australian Hip Hop scene, Community Cultural Development, Education and Youth sectors. He is an established MC, arts and cultural facilitator, educator, youth worker and creative producer. In 2008 he founded Impossible Odds Records, Queensland's only Indigenous owned and operated record label.

In 2013 Fred was a guest curator at QPAC and produced *Yawar* – the closing ceremony of QPAC's Clancestry Festival and the largest Corroboree held in the Brisbane region in 100 years.

Fred sits on the board of the Australian Live Music Business Council and is a member of the Indigenous Advisory Group for the National Indigenous Music Awards. He is Project Manager for *Wunungu Awara* (Monash University): Animating Indigenous Knowledges. This ground breaking multi art-form project supports Indigenous communities in their language preservation, using animation and music to illustrate songlines and reinvigorate interest in traditional language.

In 2020 Fred, in collaboration with experimental contrabassist Samuel Pankhurst, launched the original music project – *Yirinda* – using their compositions as a vehicle to raise awareness of the language and stories of Butchulla country.

Fred was co-winner of the APRA AMCOS and The Australian Guild of Screen Composers 2021 Best Original Song Composed for Screen: Composed by Nathan Bird (aka Birdz), Fred Leone and Daniel Rankine (aka Trials) for *Bagi-la-m Bargan* from *Looky Looky Here Comes Cooky*. The song was written for the NITV documentary which offered a fresh look at Cook's Legend from a First Nations perspective.



Photographer Jo-Anne Driessens



# Roxanne McDonald

## Where are you from – your mob?

My mob are *Mandandanji* from Roma way, *Darambal* from Rockhampton and *Wangan* mob from Clermont. And we've got connections to Stradbroke Island – mums' family was sent to Myora Mission over there in the 1930's. I've been living in Brisbane pretty much all my life, since I was seven years old, but was born out west in Roma.

## How are you connected to this place? (QPAC)

My connection started pretty early in my life around Brisbane. We knew a lot of mob. Aunty Celia Smith lived down Stanley Street there in Carina. She was Colin Smith's nan. And I remember mum taking us down there one day, she would give families food and clothes because in that time it was pretty hard especially growing up blakfella way, especially in the city in Brisbane.

I remember South Brisbane, now South Bank when it was all different. Before Expo, QPAC and all those big buildings weren't there. The Watchhouse was there though. There was always a big mob of our people in this area all the time.

I can remember our family's connection to the old people here in Brisbane. Mainly as I got older, because I got to know a lot of community when I was around 18-19 years old. My mum worked at the OPAL Centre [One People of Australia League] there and we knew a lot of the Elders then. Aunty Janie Arnold and all those old people that were really full-on to the cause of our mob in those early days, with the marches and you know, all the activism!

I've performed in lots of places around Brisbane. This is my place. My home. We had

one of my sisters born here, so she said 'I'm from Brisbane, you fellas are from out there, out west'. Its where you've grown up and where you're known. We still had a lot of family here. We had a lot of mob out in Roma, but we had a lot of mob here too on mum's side. So, we always had lots of family around us and Straddie [North Stradbroke Island] of course. Went over there every weekend just about, running around that island like a couple of wild little blak kids. Lots of memories.

And of course, Aunty Oodgeroo Noonuccal with the Walker mob, just all the families that we knew over there. It's different now, it seems like as we've grown – the older I'm getting it feels like it's not as close anymore with community. You might go to a few openings here and there, but there's just not enough of that 'place to go', to be with mob. It's the same with family too, we're all a bit separate. I wish it was back the way it was, when we were always seeing family.

We all went in the Miss OPAL Quest one year. Aunty Daphne Lavell, would set it all up and she would say 'oh Loretta can we get your girls to come into the Opal Quest?', because there weren't enough girls for the pageant. So, we three sisters went in it that year. There was only six of us altogether. Aunty Daphne had that soft voice. I can still hear her say 'oh Loretta you got any girls that wanna come into Miss OPAL?'. The Miss OPAL doesn't happen anymore.

I remember when that OPAL Centre building collapsed to the ground on Ann Street. That day was really freaky and scary. I am so glad there were no people in the building when it fell. With NAIDOC now, there doesn't seem to be that hype around it. You know it would be that opportunity to dress up and go to the NAIDOC Ball and the Miss OPAL Quest.

## How did you become a storyteller?

I was a mad, comical kid, I was always playing up, joking around. Only in front of my family though. I couldn't do it in front of strangers or people I didn't know. Dad was a bit of a storyteller and joke teller. He was a real larrikin. I think I inherited some of that from him.

I always knew that I had to do something in performing arts from when I was pretty young. I remember when we had a shelled-out TV set and I used to stick my head inside it and *gammin* pretend I was on TV. At school, I played an 'old girl' in grade 5, it was one of those Pygmalion plays. I been playing the 'old girls' ever since.

I knew that this was what I had to do and getting into the performing arts opened up all the things that I wanted to do. It was scary because I didn't have any formal training, I just came through the amateur process and for the pure love of it.

Later I got a professional opportunity with Sue Rider (Director) when we did the play *You Came to My Country and You Didn't Turn Black*, 1990 at the Queensland Museum. She gave me a go. I did that one and that was it, that was my start.

## Why is this important to you?

With some things I had to do, I wanted to run away and wanted to say 'nah I can't do this.' I would be terrified getting up on stage but I wanted to do this because it was meant to be. I overcame all that terror as the years went on. I got to do more and more things and tell stories for our mob.

I got to learn so much about the history of this country through theatre and the stories of our mob. *Cherry Pickers* and all the plays that came through *Kooemba Jdarra* (Indigenous Performing

Arts) at the time, under the directorship of Wesley Enoch in those good old days back then.

These are the times that I miss, working with our mob. There's no place for us really, we're just 'tag ons' for other companies. We don't really have an identifiable place as Aboriginal performers in this country, in this state and in this city. It's a shame.

I feel for all these young ones that are coming through places like ACPA, because that place there would have been your home. You could have been there doing all this beautiful work and all of us building skills, writing and directing, everything we needed. Just a real bloody deadly playground for all of us to work in and learn skills but it just frittered away.

I'm really sad when I think about it, but we gotta be here, we gotta work with mainstream mob. I work with mainstream mob as a living, but it's not the same – I want somewhere for our stuff to happen!

Like Triple A here, if we had a theatre space here, our own company would be good. We get each other! We got mob, we know how we all carry on and what we do! We know all the cues, the things that make up who we are.

People say 'I don't know how you do it, don't know how you learn those big scripts, remember all those steps, where you gotta be on stage'. Cause when you're on, you're on, that's it!

### **What particular power does your artform bring to storytelling?**

My superpower would be the truth-teller. I had someone come up to me after a play and say 'you moved me, you made me cry'. So, my superpower would be 'make 'em laugh, make 'em cry'. Make 'em cry especially.

I don't mean to go out and do that – you give so much of yourself when you perform and you want to be as truthful as you can. And the audience know, if you're *gammin*.

You hopefully try and hit your mark when you're performing and you hopefully hit the make to change people – to challenge people, that's all I've ever wanted to do as an actor. I couldn't picture myself doing anything else.

Every time I go into a play that's who I think of. I think of everybody whose gone before me and what they sacrificed, those old people and our families, cause we've all got a shared history in this country. I don't think any mob have gone unscathed in this place, in this country.

It's almost like your armour or weapons in a way. I've gotta do this right, do this truthfully, because on stage I represent all mob, I represent all the Old People. I always think of them and before I go on stage, I always dedicate it to them.

You know I'll go around back stage and I'll say 'this is for you mob and for my family and all the aunties and uncles'. And I feel like I've gotta do this I've gotta be in front.

And I really want to get in the other end, do some writing too. I loved to write at school. And now I want to do it. So, I think it's that progression, ya gotta write now but sometimes them old bones can't do what they used to do.

The young ones coming up now. They just blow me away, you know all these beautiful writers and young directors, actors and musicians, look at them all.

### **Is there a particular object, image or place that you cherish? Can you tell us why it's significant?**

This is something I keep with me. A tiger's eye, that was given to me by one of my fellow actors in *Yibiyung* (2008). I said 'oh I love that tiger's eye' and she said 'here you go, you can have it'. This is what blak fellas do, if someone likes something you give it to them, because it's what we do.

I always keep it in my bag, have it on me, put it on my window ledge. When I was a kid, I was always picking up rocks and putting them around me. They make me feel comfortable! I just love the feel of it and when I am anxious, I grab it and swirl it around in my hands. I love it.

I just love the feel of the tiger's eye and when you're anxious, I just grab it and swirl it around in my hands.

I used to really do the dressing room up I'd put a hand towel down on the dressing table! I had a place for everything, I just like things where they need to be.

When I'm touring, even with my script, I gotta have it right; and my pens gotta be there; cuppa tea over there; I don't know it just keeps my mind organised.

### **Is there anyone in the performing arts, specifically doesn't have to be Queensland specifically, that you looked up to?**

There's been so many people that have inspired me. I've learnt so much from so many people. Aboriginal ones and others. I've just seen the way they do their thing, processes.

Barb Lowing was one of those people who I could talk to about anything – we just connected. We did the *Rovers* play together for many years.

I learn what I can from everyone. I learnt from young ones and give back what I can.

Other Aboriginal actors who have gone on to do great things in the industry have a gift and are magical.

This industry, is a tough one but I'm glad to be in it. It feeds my soul; it's always fed my soul.

I've gotta be thinking about stuff and being around people with that energy, that creative energy and spark. You're on another level.

I couldn't do a 9-to-5. I couldn't! I'd go mad! If you're in an office with boring people it just drains your creative energy.

I'm glad I'm doing what I'm doing. For as long as I can get up in the morning and learn a script, and still go to work, I will, I'll keep doing it until I can't.

It's not easy. If you want an easy road turn back now!

### **Biography**

Roxanne's first stage performance was as part of the ensemble in Shoestring Theatre Company's 1984 pro/am production of the musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. In 1990, a role in the play *You Came To My Country and You Didn't Turn Black* for the Queensland Museum and directed by Sue Rider, proved pivotal.

She has acted in over 50 main stage plays with companies including Grin and Tonic, Kite Theatre, *Kooemba Jdarra* Indigenous Performing Arts Company, Griffin Theatre, Belvoir Street Theatre, La Boite Theatre Company and Queensland Theatre. Film and television credits include *Mabo* (2012), *Australia Day* (2017), *Grace Beside Me* (2018), *Harrow* (2018), *Deadlock* (2018), and *The End* (2020).

Roxanne's outstanding contribution to the performing arts in Queensland is widely recognised. In 2012 she received the ACPA Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Career Achievement Award. In 2000 she received a Matilda Awards Special Commendation, and the Actors and Entertainers Benevolent Fund Lifetime Achievement Award 2021.



Photographer Jo-Anne Driessens



# Margaret Harvey

## Where are you from – your mob?

I am a Saibai Island woman and I associate with the *Ait Koedal* (Crocodile) and *Samu* (Cassowary), my two clans. On my mother's side I am a Saibai Islander and on my father's side I have English Heritage.

## How are you connected to this place?

I had been to Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) during university, and we did a play at QPAC and I've worked on a show with Queensland Theatre.

To tell you the truth, I didn't really feel a connection to QPAC until Nads (Nadine McDonald Dowd), was heading up the First Nations part of QPAC, in the position she was in, she invited me in. We began the development process, before COVID hit, of a live performance piece I'd been working on with one of my Senior Cultural Knowledge Custodians. I feel that was the 'true connection' with QPAC – with Nads and the team there.

After all these years, that's the first time I was comfortable – that I could really feel comfortable in that space. That I could feel comfortable buying an expensive coffee from downstairs, and sitting in one of those chairs and tables and having a meeting there or catching up with Nads or Jules or whoever I needed to catch up with in the team. That was when I felt connected.

COVID threw everything up in the air, but I've got a show that I directed that opened at QPAC as part of Queensland Theatre's season like a week ago [February 2022], so now I feel a connection with that place. That it wasn't just a 'passing through' relationship. Now that's kind of how I feel connected to QPAC, via the First Nation connection.

Every time I've been at QPAC, I've gone into a theatre and done a creative development, like the Cremorne when invited by Nads. I'd hardly go in there otherwise. We always meet out the front in the grass area or in the café area. You can feel the 'institutionalisation' of it. I think that bit weighs heavy on you too.

## How did you become a storyteller?

It's just always been in my blood. I remember as a child sharing stories through performance of my first play really. For me it was my way of communicating and because I grew up in a predominantly white town in Roma it was a way of owning the space that my brown body inhabited. That's the only way I can explain it.

It gave me the confidence to really own who I was. And I loved reading stories that took me to far-off lands. That whole thing of reading other people's stories that I found so interesting and to be able to express other people's stories.

I also enjoyed as a child, and even today I still do! I loved that fun creative element that comes with creative theatre shows or school productions. When I was a kid and even now creating theatre – there's a childlike quality. As a storyteller!

You know within our own cultural lineage, how we tell stories, that's actually part of our blood line. Part of our cultural heritage to retain that storytelling quality, brought into adulthood. We connect with each other in telling stories that the other person can reflect back on in some way – a piece of their lives – that's how we connect with each other. It's the same with live performance theatre and all of the different mediums that we express it through.

## Why is storytelling important to you?

I think it's because stories are a way in which we communicate and understand each other. You know – it deepens our connection to each other. You see that in live performance with the relationship between audience and the actor on stage – it's very separate – you're so aware of the stage if you are the audience and for an actor – when I've performed – I am so aware of the empty seats before the show starts, realising that they'll be filled with bodies but by the end of that particular performance and there's a bow happening whether you are audience or actor – and I've been both – there's a certain connection that you do feel in that instance – it's the moment that will never be relived.

Just like, when you meet people for the first time. It truly does deepen the connection. That's why I think story is a vital part of how we live our day to day lives.

You know it's only natural that our cultural knowledge is embedded in stories. You can see how that works and plays out. It's a way of understanding the world we live in and the way of understanding who we are ourselves and who the people around us are.

I read that these stories you're gathering cover the 7 watersheds of Queensland. Actually, that's a beautiful concept and interesting because I hear from my Cultural Knowledge Custodians that the waterway is underneath the island.

Water is part of our cultural knowledge – its embedded in our spiritual knowledge too and what 'entity' is under the island. It's the way of the knowledge system.

## What particular power does your artform bring to storytelling?

I work across the disciplines – in multimedia – in live performative story – and I work in film and for me, when I feel the most powerful as a storyteller is when I am working closely with my Senior Cultural Knowledge Custodians.

They've also expressed to me that they see my role as a messenger, as an interpreter and there's certainly a power, in how we communicate those stories, and in reaching audiences, and the amount of people that you can reach, in actually all of those mediums.

The power truly is in the connection!

You can have the best story in the world but if you can't communicate it, then you cannot connect. So, I think that is where the power is in storytelling, in whatever medium that you're telling it in.

## Is there a particular object, image or place that you cherish?

Yeah, my mother passed away suddenly – 10 or 11 years ago and she was only 62. For me, I felt this complete disconnect – my father is white and he's English and I suddenly felt – because we were bought up down south and my two older brothers were born in *Zenadh Kes* (Torres Strait) and as my parents made their way south, the last three kids were born down south.

I remember having this feeling of, you know, disconnect because it was through my mother that I was connecting with my culture down south, even though we would go back up to Cape York and even though I'd been across to Saibai Island and been in *Zenadh Kes* before she had passed.

Suddenly this widening gap, as I was down south as well.

When I think about all that connection, the object that I immediately think of is something that's connected to me via my mother but is also what I would perceive to be a cultural inheritance.

That's my mother's beautiful wooden Islander comb.

There are 2 things that I kept after my mother passed, and it was the island comb and the island dress that she would wear on special occasions whether it was Christmas or whether it was a family dinner on a Sunday night and she was cooking a roast for the whole family. She would always put it on so there was always this feeling that even the dress was '*Ailan pasin*' – which means that 'good way of being with each other'. So for me it's the wooden comb that I connect to.

## Can you tell us why it's significant?

Because I have a vivid memory of her sitting on the side of her bed or standing looking out the back window as she combed her hair.

It's funny because as a child I would hate my hair combed with this big wooden implement because I had so many knots that would accumulate over a few days because I got the big frizzy hair. But I have this comb now, that I cherish and I spent the first few years picking it up. I can still smell the coconut oil because my mum was always putting coconut oil through her hair.

What was interesting was after she passed away, we would always come across these strands of beautiful white pearls under the bookshelves or behind the TV or under the bed and it went on for like – months. There was something about that connection that I've retained today. It is not just a connection to my mum but to the whole matriarchal bloodline.

I felt even stronger after she left, you know, that she wasn't just a 'singular mother' that bought me up. I kind of knew that before she passed but it took me a few years to come out of that deep grief to then to be able to know that it was actually many more than just my mother.

So yeah, that is part of the reason the comb is so significant. The strength of the matriarchal line.

## Is there anything else you want to add, or an important person you want to acknowledge?

There's a Senior Cultural Knowledge Custodian that I work closely with, and he is a big part of why I even finished my doctorate which is centred around caring for Saibai Island stories.

He is a big part of what I am doing now. I am doing a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Melbourne.

I am beginning it now. I am spending the year up in Cairns because he is based here.

He is kind of what I consider, my professor.

He's a big one for cultural knowledge but he is also from a very long lineage of the performative story telling aspect. He's a choreographer and that goes back a long, long line. I refer to him as *Awa* (Uncle) Jeff Aniba Waia and he's really taken me under his wing.

There's a lot of knowledge – it's an uncle and a niece – there is a lot of knowledge too, that can't be shared, but it's a way of, kind of working together, talking about what it is that we are wanting to share with the world and what is it that he wants to also keep alive.

It's all centred around climate action and mobilising the people through that kind of ecological knowledge that he brings with him.

My two Senior Cultural Knowledge Custodians would be the ones that I give deep gratitude and acknowledgement to, the first being *Awa* Jeff Aniba Waia along with *Awa* Walter Waia.

It's interesting because when I was talking about it during my PhD – I was thinking – here I am talking to these people within the university context – you get given these 'big names' who are scientists, and who are professors, and I think, hang on!!

These uncles, two brothers, who are quite 'big' in terms of the cultural knowledge of the '*Zenadh Kes*' – from the one bloodline, from my clan *Ait Koedal*, and I thought – these are my Professors, my Scientists – and now this is how I refer to them when I am speaking to the academy.

I think it is important to make sure we are elevating their status – in the way that western knowledge systems see them. It's that thing of professional status!

They see the term 'Elder' as something that's kind of cuddly and full of spiritual guidance when actually it's that! and more!

You will never embed indigenous knowledge in western knowledge. That's not going to happen and that should never happen! It cannot happen!

It just has to be acknowledged. That strength and power, you know!

And it's that thing of being 'off country' or 'off island' to even figure out the questions you want to ask. It can only come from just sitting around and just story telling – having a yarn – a cuppa tea – it may even just begin with – a tree in the back yard or a television show that was on last night – and before you know it – that's when you know it's about connection first and then trust!

You've just gotta switch on!

And for someone who is still really learning and in that foetal stage of just even understanding anything – I am not even birthed yet – in understanding anything my *Awa* is taking about. I am in a very conceptual stage.

And it's that thing about not trying to compartmentalise what I hear! Knowing that that fits in somewhere with something else. You have to let it sit, sometimes it like, I wonder why he holds that? Is there a reason why he's got it?

You've just gotta let it flow from the ether.

I want to say that I appreciate all of you inviting me in on this. It's really humbling to be a part of. Thank you!

You're all doing really amazing stuff at QPAC – I think that you're doing some of the best stuff if not 'the best' in white institutions where they are telling stories.

I can't name another place like that. People are blown away when I tell them about what you guys are doing at QPAC. It's amazing and I am so proud to even have a connection to what you guys are doing.

## Biography

Dr Margaret Harvey works across live performance and film, creating and re-creating stories as a researcher, performer, writer, director and producer. She recently completed her PhD at Monash University titled *Caring for Saibai Island Stories: conducting research and creating a performative story in an ethical and culturally appropriate way*. She is one half of The Jo Ze Sparks: Storytellers who are intersecting culture, research and creative practice. Margaret's groundbreaking interdisciplinary performative storytelling mythology connects physical/spiritual planes, with a philosophy of Caring for Story that reclaims Indigenous narratives that support people's continued survival, dignity and well-being.

She has directed and produced many documentaries for NITV. In 2014 she was

director and co-devisor of the critically acclaimed *My Lover's Bones*, an ancient gothic horror story about Jargon the bunyip of the *Quandamooka* people, set in modern times. In 2015 she was assistant director for Circus Oz's *But Wait There's More* and in 2018 Margaret co-created *Woer Wayepa – The Water is Rising* about the impact of climate change in the Torres Straits.

In 2019, QPAC hosted an intensive creative development period with The Jo Ze Sparks to further progress the work *Gubal Thayemin* which was co-created by Margaret and her uncle, Torres Strait, Saibaian Elder, Knowledge Custodian and Storyteller, Mr Jeffrey Aniba-Waia

2021 witnessed her unique vision applied to the classic 1960s drama *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* which she directed for State Theatre Company South Australia, and for Queensland Theatre in 2022.



Photographer Desmond Connellan