

Emma Cox

## **“What’s past is prologue”: Performing Shakespeare and Aboriginality in Australia**

“Come unto these yellow sands, / And then take hands”  
—*The Tempest* (1.2.375-76)

At the beginning of the second Act of *The Tempest*, Antonio compels Sebastian to his murderous purpose, perceiving distance from civilization and conventional political power, not to mention an heir-apparent, as a rationale for immediate action: “what’s past is prologue” (2.1.253). The theatrical metaphor is, for Antonio, a means by which to assert his mastery over history. However, as the play unfolds and the past makes its claim upon the protagonists, Antonio’s words echo as a reminder of history’s continual *presence*, its inextricable implication in the contemporary world as it is made and remade. The entanglement of history and presence forms the context of the Australian performances of Shakespeare I examine here. These works are informed by the cultural and territorial dispossession, as well as the ongoing strategies of resistance, that since colonization have conditioned the lived realities of Aboriginal Australians.

In keeping with a pattern established in the early days of British settlement, performances of Shakespeare’s plays are a staple of many Australian theatrical calendars. Increasingly, and often at their most effective, these performances transact within and for their local contexts, negotiating contemporary Australian cultures and identities. In light of the solid body of so-called alternative or revisionist Shakespeare scholarship, particularly in the area of postcolonialism—the critical basis of John Golder and Richard Madeleine’s observation, “Aboriginal Australians have good reasons to be suspicious of the ‘ideological work’ Shakespeare can be ‘made to perform’” (9)—it is striking to consider that “Aboriginalized” performances have provided some of the most innovative and important Shakespearean theatre in Australia in recent years.

While there is some way to go before the presence of indigenous performers in Shakespearean plays becomes commonplace in Australia, a number of productions over the last two decades have featured indigenous performers, and many of them have actively engaged with indigenous cultures and/or politics. In this chapter I examine Simon Phillips’s 1999 and 2001 productions of *The Tempest* for the Queensland Theatre Company and the Melbourne Theatre Company (respectively); a 1999 cross-cultural production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Sue Rider and produced by Brisbane-based La Boite Theatre and

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Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts; an all-indigenous production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Noel Tovey and produced by the Sydney Theatre Company in 1997 as part of the Olympic Festival of the Dreaming; the Darwin Theatre Company's 2006 production of *Othello*, directed by John du Feu; and the Sydney-based Bell Shakespeare Company's 2007 production of *Othello*, directed by Marion Potts. I conclude with a brief overview of the Australian Shakespeare Company's ongoing relationship with with indigenous artists and the Wugularr Aboriginal community.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis offered here is by no means a comprehensive survey of the work of Aboriginal theatre practitioners in Australian Shakespeare. While it is always risky to cite a "first" in relation to histories as inherently ephemeral as theatrical ones, Brian Syron's work in the early 1970s as Associate Director of Sydney's Old Tote Theatre made him, according to Elizabeth Schafer, "probably the first Aboriginal director to direct professional Shakespeare in Australia" ("Reconciliation Shakespeare?" 66). Andrew Ross's inaugural work for Perth's Black Swan Theatre in 1991 was a multicultural production of *Twelfth Night* which cast indigenous performers Kelton Pell, Stephen Albert and John Moore in non-racially-marked roles, alongside white and Asian counterparts. The late Kevin Smith performed in several Shakespearean roles, including the gravedigger in Neil Armfield's 1994 *Hamlet* and Caliban in Armfield's 1995 postcolonial *The Tempest*, both for Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre, as well as Bottom and Pyramus in Tovey's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lesley Marller gave a cross-gender performance as Baptista in Sue Rider's 1994 *The Taming of the Shrew* for La Boite in Brisbane and played the Nurse in Rider's 1999 *Romeo and Juliet*. In the same year as the latter, indigenous practitioner (and current Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company) Wesley Enoch directed a cross-cultural production of *Romeo and Juliet* for the Bell Shakespeare Company. In 1997, Jim Sharman's production of *The Tempest* for the Bell Shakespeare Company cast indigenous performers in the roles of Ariel (Rachael Maza) and Miranda (Paula Arundell). Deborah Mailman, one of Australia's best known indigenous actors, has played several Shakespearean roles, including Kate in Rider's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Helena in Tovey's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Cordelia in Barrie Kosky's 1998 Bell Shakespeare production of *King Lear* and Rosalind in Armfield's 1999 Belvoir production of *As You Like It*. The latter work also featured Aboriginal performers in the roles of Duke Senior (Bob Maza), Phebe (Irma Woods) and Silvius (Bradley Byquar). In 2008, indigenous artist Wayne Blair, who performed the lead in Bell's 2007 *Othello*, directed a cast of indigenous and non-indigenous actors in Sydney Theatre Company's theatre education production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which reimagined the story in an Australian outback / red desert context. Aboriginal actor, writer and musician Leah Purcell played Regan in Bell Shakespeare's and Queensland Theatre Company's 2010

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of some sections of this analysis have appeared in *Australasian Drama Studies* (2004) and *Southerly* (2004).

co-production of *King Lear*, directed by Marion Potts. Some of these works, such as Armfield’s *The Tempest* and *As You Like It*, and Blair’s *Romeo and Juliet*, engaged with indigenous cultural politics; others, such as Ross’s *Twelfth Night*, Kosky’s *King Lear* and Potts’s *King Lear* are instances of “colour-blind casting”, in which a performer’s indigeneity is not explicitly relevant to his or her role.

But Enoch maintains that the presence of Aboriginal performers in Shakespearean plays remains non-standard and implicitly political: “whenever you get Aboriginal actors on stage, people think differently about the play ... by having indigenous actors on stage, people will be ... exposed to the *idea* of Aboriginal stories and issues”.<sup>2</sup> This exposure is politically and culturally effective as an intervention into dominant economies of historico-cultural value. Traditional Shakespeare scholarship generally upholds the view that Shakespeare’s work represents exemplary creative achievement; within a (post)colonialist context, this notion can translate Shakespeare as evincing, in the words of Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, “the superiority of the ‘civilised races’” (1). From its arrival in Australia alongside the British, Shakespeare has occupied a valorized cultural position, and as various critics, particularly within postcolonialism, have argued, this status has operated as a tool of enculturation, inasmuch as it upholds what might be termed (somewhat imprecisely and reductively) Eurocentric cultural hierarchies and ideologies. Postcolonial interrogations of Shakespeare, informed by the revisionist or alternative readings of the 1980s (particularly the work of Terence Hawkes, Stephen Greenblatt, Dymphna Callaghan, Jonathan Dollimore, and Alan Sinfield), tend to take two main approaches. The brand of criticism that posits both Shakespeare’s plays and his cultural capital as being unequivocally oppressive is embodied in the Australian publication, *Shakespeare’s Books: Contemporary Cultural Politics and the Persistence of Empire* (1993), an “actively contestatory” collection of essays edited by Philip Mead and Marion Campbell (2). A less oppositional stance underlies *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (1998), edited by Loomba and Orkin, which engages the question of how Shakespeare’s texts might function productively in contemporary postcolonial and multicultural societies. The performances under analysis here put aside the totalizing view that Shakespeare’s imperial signification is unequivocal; they confronted and questioned mainstream expectations and definitions, and in so doing, articulated their own spaces for Aboriginal artists, and for Shakespeare’s texts.

### Shakespeare and Reconciliation

Perhaps the most prominent manifestations of Aboriginal Australian Shakespeare in recent years are responses to the national Reconciliation project (this concerns cultural and political respect for the Aboriginal people as the original inhabitants of Australia, acknowledgement of past injustices, the development of

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes from Wesley Enoch are taken from my interview, unless otherwise specified.

better relationships and the eradication of inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians).<sup>3</sup> Given the relatively widespread cultural awareness of its colonialist reading, *The Tempest* is an ideal, if not obvious, choice to serve the interests of Australian reconciliatory politics. Simon Phillips's production of the play for the Queensland Theatre Company (QTC) in 1999 and his restaged version for the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) in 2001 were explicitly political engagements with Australia's colonial history and contemporary politics.<sup>4</sup> Enoch was associate director and cultural consultant for the QTC production. The work transposed the drama to late eighteenth-century Australia, where it served as a parable for the colonial encounter. A red earth stage-scape provided an iconic setting for the enactment of the relationship between invading Europeans and the indigenous Caliban (Glenn Shea), Ariel (Margaret Harvey) and island spirits (Jagera Jarjum dance troupe).

Reconciliation was the focus of political attention in Australia at the time of the production (especially during its QTC staging), as well as the "affective practice", in Ghassan Hage's sense (10), of *hope* by large numbers of the Australian public who performed symbolic actions such as national people's bridge walks, marches and the signing of "sorry" books.<sup>5</sup> It was the eve of the official 2001 target for a national declaration of reconciliation, set with bipartisan support in the federal parliament in 1991.<sup>6</sup> Locating itself decisively within this cultural climate, the QTC and later MTC production espoused the need for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Critics were attentive to the theme and its immediate implications. Writing in response to the QTC staging, Drew Whitehead perceived specific political resonance and affect: "we have a Prime Minister that just cannot bring himself to say that special word [sorry], and it was surprisingly cathartic to see Prospero do so in this context" (n.p.).<sup>7</sup> Also referring to the QTC work, James Harper reflected on the cultural

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of ways in which Australian Shakespeare productions have functioned to imagine and enact forms of Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, see Elizabeth Schafer, "Reconciliation Shakespeare? Aboriginal Presence in Australian Shakespeare Production", in *Playing Australia: Australian Theatre and the International Stage*, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the Melbourne season of Phillips's *The Tempest*, see Sue Tweg, "Dream On: A 'Reconciliation' *Tempest* in 2001".

<sup>5</sup> The most high-profile Reconciliation event was the Sydney Harbour Bridge peoples' walk, which took place on 28 May 2000 and attracted 250,000 people.

<sup>6</sup> The 2001 target was not met and, notwithstanding Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's official apology to the Aboriginal Stolen Generations in 2008, interest in reconciliation has declined as Australia's dominant concerns have shifted; Suvendrini Perera identifies 2001 as marking a "shift in focus from the pivotal question of internal or domestic sovereignty and the relationship between the state and its Indigenous subjects to the exercise of sovereignty at the extremities of the national geo-body over its oceans and neighbouring regions, as well as upon enemies imaginatively located at the limits of the nation" (4-5).

<sup>7</sup> Former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard (1996-2007), notoriously refused to make a formal apology to Aboriginal Australians for the atrocities that accompanied colonisation; in February 2008, as the first item of parliamentary business, the newly elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologised to the Aboriginal Stolen Generations, who were forcibly removed from their families under a decades-long government policy, and their descendents.

challenges of race-relations in Australia, observing that Prospero’s (played by John Stanton) “grudging but ultimately acquiescent attitude ... implies parallels with contemporary ambivalence about the concept of reconciliation with Aboriginal people” (21).

Shea’s initial appearance as Caliban produced an immediate confrontation: shackled in chains, he recalled Bennelong, the Eora Aboriginal man who was captured and shackled in the late eighteenth-century under Governor Phillip’s regime (Figure 1). Caliban wore a red army jacket and a nameplate that proclaimed his imposed title in brazen lettering; these were intentionally reminiscent of the accoutrements given to Aboriginal people during the early colonial period (“Performance Notes” n.p.). The invasion and dispossession narrative was particularly conspicuous in the scene where the fool Stephano (characterized, appropriately in the Australian context, as a convict figure) gives Caliban alcohol and in so doing gains a compliant servant, the drunken Caliban declaring, “I’ll show thee every fertile inch o’th’ island ... I prithee, be my god” (2.2.140-41). In the production, after refusing Stephano’s initial offer of alcohol, and spitting out his first forced mouthful, Shea’s Caliban drank deeply. The scene was accompanied by uneasy strains of music, and silently watched



Figure 1: Caliban (Glenn Shea) with Prospero (John Stanton), *The Tempest*, Queensland Theatre Company, 1999. (Photo: David Kelly.)

by the indigenous island spirits. It suggested Caliban's internalization of the new order of power established by the shipwrecked invaders of his island. Applied to the Australian context, in which alcohol abuse within many Aboriginal communities is disproportionately high, the scene was resonant and troubling.

The final scene between Caliban and Prospero was made to engage a reconciliatory politics. The master's ambiguous words, "this thing of darkness / I acknowledge mine" (5.1.275), were enacted to suggest an admission of culpability: as Prospero lunged to strike Caliban, the swift protective reactions of Ariel and the island spirits gave him cause to pause, consider his actions, and finally embrace his slave. Phillips considered two different endings for Caliban. One was a bleak conclusion of alienation and despair whereby he would remain in a corner of the stage, drinking. This would constitute a stark indictment of the detrimental impact of colonial invasion, and like the shackling of Caliban, would parallel the alcoholic death of Bennelong. In the alternative ending, Caliban would pull off his nameplate, throw it into the air and run off stage, calling out in his indigenous language that he is coming home. Ultimately, the latter was selected. As Phillips explains, this performative overlay provided "a stronger sense of Caliban moving out of the shackles of the colonial experience and into something different".<sup>8</sup> Caliban's recuperation of his native language at this point represented a performative intervention into his oft-cited linguistic containment (Greenblatt, *Learning* 16–39; Brown esp. 61–2). The production appropriated in these ways Shakespeare's ambivalent ending in the service of an affective representation of indigenous agency, generating engagement and hope (in an imagined future) within the space of the theatre, an emotional transaction of the type that can, in Baz Kershaw's view, influence "wider social and political realities" (1) by prompting social action and change.

The depiction of Ariel's liberation also directed the Shakespearean text towards indigenous interests. In incongruous juxtaposition with her native emu feather skirt, Ariel wore a European-style bone corset, materializing her bodily discipline under Prospero's power (Stanton's Prospero was able to paralyze Harvey's Ariel with a sharp jolt of his staff). Her skin was painted white, denoting mourning in an Aboriginal context. Ariel's eventual freedom was a crucial transformative moment: instead of Prospero's epilogue, the closing scene consisted of Ariel removing her corset as the female island spirits helped her wash the white from her body. This ritual of decolonizing the body functioned in a similar manner to Caliban's removal of his nameplate by signifying the end of Ariel's mourning, and her reclamation of physical and spiritual self-determination and sovereignty.

Phillips's production depicted the invaders ceding sovereignty and departing at the end of the play, therefore effectively sidestepping the assimilation that Patrick Wolfe describes as the third stage of Australian settler-colonialism. Wolfe observes that after the incarceration phase, in which indigenous people were kept within fixed locations, the shift to assimilation was a crucial "prerequisite to the establishment of the nation-state, with its stable territorial basis" (101).

<sup>8</sup> Quotes from Simon Phillips are taken from my interview, unless otherwise specified.

In terms of this colonial template, then, Phillips’s play failed to “complete the cultural continuum” (Wolfe 102). The critical reception of *The Tempest* was divided over the issue of its conclusion. For Bruce Parr, the brazen historical unreality was an intractable problem: “we know, and this crucially undermines the production, that it is the Aborigines’ fate that the Europeans never departed Australia” (43). Harper considered the possibility of symbolic and affective work, observing that although “Aboriginal magic could not overcome colonial aggression, the colonists never departed and have yet voluntarily to give up significant power”, the production did “give a sense of how an act of reconciliation might feel, and of its moral necessity” (21). Elizabeth Schafer agreed that audiences were “left ... with a dream that was worth dreaming” (75). Even if the play’s conclusion could offer little more than an affective, symbolic image of relinquished colonial sovereignty, the very *disjunction* between Australia’s historical reality and the play’s conclusion underlined the urgency of reconciling the former.

Phillips asserts that *The Tempest*’s reconciliatory politics went “beyond just what the audience saw”, manifesting as cultural dialogue in rehearsal. Enoch credits Phillips for “engender[ing] a sense of trust ... negotiation, and debate”, which enabled Aboriginal expression to operate as an “integrated [element of the work], and not as an adjunct ... to it”. As artistic and cultural consultant, one of Enoch’s primary tasks involved fitting Shakespeare’s magic into an Aboriginal context, fundamental to which was the assertion of the island spirits’ position as custodians of their land (a position that, as I explain, was for members of Jagera Jarjum indivisible from broader social and political realities). Enoch perceived Prospero’s control over the spirits to be limited: “white men *never* have control over the spirits of this island. ... They always think they do, but they don’t”. The indigenous connection to land was performatively conveyed through the staging of the interaction between the island spirits and the invaders, the latter remaining oblivious to the spirits’ constant surveillance: Jagera Jarjum would tightly encircle the Europeans, creating powerful verbal and percussive rhythms. In this way, the Shakespearean text was overlaid with an Aboriginal performative text; as Enoch observes, Jagera Jarjum offered “a *very* different performance language to the ‘actors’”. Helen Gilbert argues that the narrative techniques of Aboriginal dance can intervene in traditional European storytelling to re-present “history, and colonisation, as a spatial rather than linear narrative” (“The Dance as Text” 140). Within the framework of Shakespeare’s play, Jagera Jarjum offered an alternative, corporeal narrative of (post)colonial power relations and knowledges.

Jagera Jarjum were adamant that they were not the silent functionaries of an Aboriginal aesthetic; in the programme note, the group explained their cultural and political position, as well as their view of what the play was expressing.<sup>9</sup> In rehearsal, they articulated alternative perspectives and prompted performative negotiations. For instance, regarding their performances as ritual (as opposed to

<sup>9</sup> QTC’s programme note reads: “Jagera Jarjum believe in the strength and integrity of culture, drawing an unbroken line from Before Cook (B.C.) to the present day. Culture is an integral part of life and they express the need to practise it and keep it strong” (Programme Note n.p.).

theatrical mimesis), Jagera Jarjum objected to the actors walking upon the leaves that remained on stage after one of their dances (the leaves had been used in a spirit-raising ritual and therefore contained spirit), and as a result, new ways were devised for the actors to exit the stage. Critics were divided over the question of Jagera Jarjum's Aboriginal authenticity. Harper asserted that their performance was crucial to the relocation of the Shakespearean text, observing that they were "pivotal to the ultimate plausibility ... they embody Shakespeare's 'sounds and sweet airs' in a place far from any gauzy, ethereal fairyland" (21). In contrast, Parr argued that the group's "involvement offer little more than the spectacle of indigenes performing to paying tourists. The group ... seem brought in literally to provide colour and movement" (43). Parr's observation serves as a reminder that Aboriginal agency in a cross-cultural project cannot circumvent the receptive codes of a commodity market that values (and decontextualizes) the so-called traditional and exotic.

The problematics of spectacle and authenticity also apply to Harvey's performance as Ariel. Phillips wanted Ariel's songs to be translated into Harvey's Torres Strait indigenous language and performed with didgeridoo accompaniment. The didgeridoo originated in the north of Australia and was not known to other Aboriginal cultures until after colonization (Hanna 79). Its iconic position today testifies to its widespread circulation as a commodified symbol of generic Aboriginality. Because the didgeridoo is not an instrument of Harvey's culture, Torres Strait community elders were opposed to its juxtaposition with their indigenous language. Phillips ultimately made the aesthetic decision that the didgeridoo was "the more important element" and Ariel's songs were sung in English.<sup>10</sup> The incident raises the question of whether Harvey's identity should have held primacy over the character she was portraying, given that that character was closely bound with and dependant upon Harvey's indigeneity. It focuses one of the ways in which cross-cultural work can be a site for battles waged over identity, ownership, aesthetics and control.

Like the QTC/MTC production, Brisbane-based La Boite Theatre and Kooemba Jdarra's 1999 co-production of *Romeo and Juliet* utilized Shakespeare's text to explore the operation of racist ideology and the issue of reconciliation. The work was directed by Sue Rider, La Boite's then artistic director, with Nadine McDonald, of Kooemba Jdarra, as assistant director. Since its formation in 1993, Kooemba Jdarra has become a key proponent of Aboriginal cultural, social and political expression in the performing arts. *Romeo and Juliet* devised the simple strategy of casting the Capulet family as indigenous and the Montague family as white Australian.

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<sup>10</sup> The significance of this loss is crystallized in Helen Gilbert's observation, "Because ... [Aboriginal] languages are performed rather than inscribed, they proclaim radical alterity in a context where non-Aboriginal audience members can neither 'look up' the meaning nor quite imagine how such words might be scripted ... this alterity ... enacts an important mode of resistance for oral cultures against the hegemony of literate ones" (*Sightlines* 85).

In addition, the Capulet family was comprised almost entirely of women, and the Montague family of men. The roles of Lord and Lady Capulet and Lord and Lady Montague were collapsed into the single characters of Lady Capulet and Lord Montague, respectively. This enabled the production to extrapolate its examination of prejudice beyond the politics of skin colour by establishing a contrast between two different types of power relations: a patriarchal white society was set against an Aboriginal society whose organization disrupted this dominant order. For McDonald, this was a particularly important aspect of the production’s expression of Aboriginality. She explains: “black women ... have more of a purpose in grounding our culture and grounding our family”.<sup>11</sup> As the head of the matriarchal Capulet family, the authoritative figure of Lady Capulet stood as an example of Aboriginal agency and self-determination, and by subsuming the role of Lord Capulet, supplanted a Shakespearean representative of European, masculine authority.<sup>12</sup> The production also featured an indigenous woman in the role of Judge, who replaced Shakespeare’s Prince Escalus, and further confirmed the importance of indigenous female authority.

The position of the Aboriginal women in *Romeo and Juliet* implies a bleak concomitant social reality; Rosemary Neill points out that the fact that middle-aged and older indigenous women are increasingly the cornerstone figures that hold families and communities together, fighting to curb violence, vandalism, alcoholism and corruption, “tells us much about the emasculation of indigenous male identity” (100). In this light, the patriarchal Montague family in Rider’s production can be seen not only as a counterpoint to the matriarchal Capulet family, but also as representative of a dominant social order that has overpowered and subsumed indigenous male leadership. Certainly, within the production, the death of a potential indigenous male leader—Tybalt—is largely the result of his authority coming into contact with its apparently incompatible other: white Australian masculinity.

Rider sought to emphasize family structures in order to convey the tragedy as not merely that of two individuals, but of two families and their communities. Employing a mode of strategic essentialism, Jace Weaver claims community identity as a characteristic feature of indigenous societies, which he describes as synecdochic (in which self and society are conceptualized as a whole), distinguished from metonymic Western cultures (where the individual is conceptualized as a single element within a society) (227). The community focus of the La Boite/Kooemba Jdarra *Romeo and Juliet* meant that the deaths reverberated within a context where they represented not just the death of a young individual, but as Rider puts it, “another black death”.<sup>13</sup> In a country where indigenous youth

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<sup>11</sup> Quotes from Nadine McDonald are taken from my interview, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>12</sup> Lady Capulet’s appearance and characterization were partially inspired by Evelyn Scott, an Aboriginal woman from North Queensland who has been an active figure in indigenous politics for over thirty years. At the time of La Boite and Kooemba Jdarra’s production, Scott was chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

<sup>13</sup> Quotes from Sue Rider are taken from my interview, unless otherwise specified.

(especially male) are increasingly at risk for suicide, this is an urgent message.<sup>14</sup>

The production claimed reconciliation as a difficult and complex process, rather than a discrete political act. It opened with an official meeting between the warring families, presided over by the Judge. Rider explains that this scene was devised to create “a sense that reconciliation between the two families was being forced upon them by the State”. The scene began in silence as members of the two families arrived at the meeting and seated themselves opposite each other around a large boardroom table, and ended in a violent brawl provoked by the question, “Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?” (1.1.39). After Tybalt’s death, the table split apart, revealing a faint image of the Aboriginal flag underneath, and the space for genuine reconciliation beyond the boardroom context. Standing over the flag in the production’s final moments, Lady Capulet initiated a handshake with a similarly grief-stricken Montague, who moments earlier had pulled Juliet’s arm away from his son’s lifeless body in a gesture of racist aversion. This tentative handshake created a sense of difficult work to be done. By initiating the handshake, Lady Capulet emblemized the necessity for Aboriginal leaders to play an *active* role in reconciliation processes.

Performance reviews were divided over *Romeo and Juliet*’s political efficacy. Paul Galloway regarded the racial delineation as “a simplistic conceit which ... wound up traducing indigenous history and experience. As with the Prime Minister’s recent mealy-mouthed statement of regret, it contrived to get the white guys off the hook” (8). This concern is an important one inasmuch as the representation of marginalized groups runs the risk of being regarded as sufficient social action, rather than as a stimulus for further action and change. Viewing the work in a different light, Veronica Kelly observed, “what might have been a plonkingly obvious political metaphor” was explored “lightly and tactfully” (17). Kelly discerned that the tragedy forced the “powerful elders ... to understand that reconciliation isn’t something that can be imposed merely by force or law. The heart must also achieve its own understanding” (17). The divergence in critical response hints at the enormous complexity of race politics and reconciliation in Australia and to the absence of consensus over how it is to be negotiated.

### All-Aboriginal Shakespeare

Sydney’s hosting of the Olympic Games in 2000 provoked wide-ranging analyses of nationhood, culture and identity at the turn of the new millennium. One line of cultural activity connected with the Olympics was indigenous theatre and dance practitioner Noel Tovey’s ambitious mainstage theatre project for the Olympic Festival of the Dreaming in 1997: an all-Aboriginal production

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<sup>14</sup> Wesley Enoch connects the problem of indigenous youth suicide with the bleakness of much indigenous experience, observing, “When a culture sacrifices its hope, young people are the touchstone for that—they kill themselves. There are a lot of deaths happening, not just in custody. Youth suicide is a real issue, and in Aboriginal communities it’s becoming more so” (qtd. in Morgan, “A Black” 12).

of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.<sup>15</sup> Produced by the Sydney Theatre Company (STC), the work was marketed as Australia’s first all-Aboriginal performance of a Shakespearean play.<sup>16</sup> Instead of utilizing the influential forums of the STC and the Festival of the Dreaming to comment on indigenous and non-indigenous relations, Tovey sought to place indigenous artists centre stage in their own right. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* employed a combination of Aboriginal Dreamtime and Elizabethan-style imagery, creating a dialogue between the play’s original performative context and an Aboriginal interpretive framework. Identifying a parallel between the play’s forest/fairy world and Aboriginal Dreamtime, Tovey asserts: “There’s probably not another play that has more echoes for us. Shakespeare didn’t know it, but he was creating the perfect piece for an Aboriginal company to do” (qtd. in McCarthy 3).

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was subject to close scrutiny along the lines of cultural authenticity and political efficacy. The overriding philosophy of the Festival of the Dreaming concerned indigenous “Authorship and Control” (Roberts 8), and Shakespeare’s presence in the programme was a matter of contention amongst some Aboriginal writers who felt that they had not been “given a fair ‘look in’” (Perkins 22). This is a reasonable complaint, but one with complex implications: it is difficult to balance the need to provide platforms for indigenous writing and the need to represent the diversity of indigenous creative practice within the bounds of a cultural festival. Theatre critic Colin Rose objected to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s presence in the Festival: “I am much more interested in hearing their own stories than seeing Aboriginal artists take on Western plays” (qtd. in Morgan, “This is a Tip” 12). This comment effectively delineates a textual territory for “Aboriginal theatre” that does not include Shakespeare. Strictly in terms of authorship, this view is valid, but it reflects a static conception of the cultural meaning and ownership of Shakespeare’s texts, and moreover, a suspicion of Aboriginal expression that originates from a contemporary perspective wherein Shakespeare’s plays can be objects of creative, and indeed cultural, identification.

In Tovey’s production, the mortal characters wore white, Elizabethan-style costumes (Fig. 2) that contrasted with the “indigenous” forest characters: Puck (Laurence Clifford) was covered with small stalks suggestive of mangrove shoots, while Oberon (Glenn Shea) and Titania’s (Tessa Leahy) costumes displayed stylized, glittering images of the Rainbow Serpent. Titania slept in a giant waratah bower and was attended by the usual Shakespearean fairies as well as a Kangaroo and a feather-clad Lyrebird. These indigenous additions marked Tovey’s decisive

<sup>15</sup> The Festival of the Dreaming was the first of four arts festivals that were held in the build-up to the 2000 Olympic Games. Directed by Rhoda Roberts, it was a landmark event that showcased the work of indigenous artists from around the world, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal Australia.

<sup>16</sup> It is quite possible that all-Aboriginal performances of Shakespeare took place prior to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* within smaller (and therefore less well-documented) performative contexts. As Elizabeth Schafer observes, in “schools, youth productions and other areas traditionally ignored by historians ... Aboriginal theatre workers have been working with Shakespeare for a long time” (65).



*Figure 2: Helena (Deborah Mailman) and Demetrius (Tony Briggs),  
A Midsummer Night's Dream, Sydney Theatre Company, 1997.  
(Photo: Tracey Schramm.)*

appropriation of the Shakespearean text. So too did a wry textual modification whereby Lysander’s (Gary Cooper) lines, “Away you Ethiope!” (3.2.258), and “Out, tawny Tartar” (3.2.264), were replaced by a scathing, “Out, you gubba”.<sup>17</sup> The production employed computer-generated projections, offering a cinematic distillation of the play’s Athenian and Dreamtime cultural worlds.

Tovey maintains that he did not wish to address any “specific indigenous issues” in the production, asserting that it “was not about politics in any way” (personal correspondence n.p.). Of course, an Aboriginalized Shakespeare project has an inherent political context, and in this case, the politics were amplified by the marketing of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as Australia’s first all-Aboriginal Shakespearean production. Certainly, the work confronted some of the assumptions that Tovey encountered prior to its undertaking: “People were saying there weren’t enough Aboriginal actors, there hadn’t been enough Aboriginal actors through drama schools, they wouldn’t understand the genre” (qtd. in Horsburgh 9). He was determined that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* would challenge such preconceptions, and “prove that Indigenous actors were as capable as non Indigenous actors of playing the classics” (personal correspondence n.p.).<sup>18</sup> This comment betrays a patent, even if unacknowledged, political imperative.

Tovey’s desire to demonstrate the skill of Aboriginal actors via Shakespeare has problematic implications, inasmuch as it confirms Shakespeare’s imperialist image as a conferrer of cultural value and artistic merit. Enoch questions the desire to prove indigenous artists can act “as well as everyone else” (qtd. in Perkins 22) and advocates instead a celebration of diverse theatrical styles and textual sources. Theatre critic James Waites argues that the issue of skill is redundant: “The motivation seemed to be to say Aborigines can do Shakespeare, too. So far as I am concerned we are past that stage” (qtd. in Morgan, “This is a Tip” 12). Regardless of whether this comment is premature (I would argue that it probably is), in the end, Tovey’s rationale reflects a pragmatic understanding of, and a strategic response to, Shakespeare’s dominant (elevated) signification. His work confronted stereotypes about Shakespeare and about Aboriginal artists, and created new performance histories for both.

The Aboriginal symbols in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were mediated through dominant, and conflicting, definitions of Aboriginal authenticity and cultural value. Pamela Payne commended the recontextualization of the text and the creation of “a Dreamtime that is Aboriginal and also Shakespearean” (23). Similarly, Allen Myers nostalgically claimed that the effectiveness of the performance was largely due to the evocation “of a nearly lost European dreamtime” (n.p.). Myers’s comment situates the production’s Dreamtime cultural framework as providing insight into a primordial spirituality from which European culture has become alienated, suggesting a conception of Aboriginal authenticity

<sup>17</sup> “Gubba” is an Aboriginal colloquial term for white Australians.

<sup>18</sup> Deborah Mailman, who portrayed Helena in Tovey’s production, echoes this view: “Doing work such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* will hopefully prove that we can speak any theatrical language” (qtd. in Taylor, “Mailman Delivers” 18).

that functions, as Graham Huggan argues, “as a kind of cultural fetish reminding white Australians of the discrepancy between past material gains and present spiritual losses” (160-61).

Several critics expressed the opposite sentiment. Waites deemed the integration of Aboriginal symbols into a “Western” textual form “tokenistic, even a little kitsch” (14). The fact that Waites omits to evaluate the authenticity of the production’s Western forms, or to consider whether the latter were de-authenticated by their representation alongside Aboriginal modes of expression, seems to indicate the close scrutiny under which Aboriginal representation is held in relation to so-called authentic contextualization. Geoffrey Milne’s evaluation of the aesthetics of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was broadly similar to Waites’s: “the production as a whole looked rather like a cross between Walt Disney and the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre circa 1959” (37). With this observation, Milne aligns the value of inauthenticity with populist commodification and cultural decontextualization. His comparison with the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre is a reference to Peter Hall’s 1959 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at Stratford’s Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, which also featured actors in barefoot Elizabethan-style costumes. For Milne, the Elizabethan element of Tovey’s production incongruously recalled an antiquated (and conspicuously British) mode of theatrical expression. Significantly, unlike other critics, Milne treated the production’s Elizabethan aesthetic with a similar level scrutiny as he did its traditional Aboriginal elements.

The concept of authenticity, so central to the critical reception of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is by definition exclusionary, and has the potential to be deterministic and delimiting. Gareth Griffiths observes that certain representations of Aboriginality can become “subsumed by the white media” as authentic, and can “be used to create a privileged hierarchy of Australian Aboriginal voice” (71). The value of authenticity is frequently attached to Aboriginal expression that is deemed culturally “pure”, or as Alan Filewod describes it, “less mediated” (365). According to this understanding, the capacity of the culturally hybridized *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to present an authentic expression of Aboriginality would be inherently limited. Indigenous cultural commentator Marcia Langton rejects the notion of pure, authentic Aboriginal culture. Langton calls for greater understanding of Aboriginality as “a field of intersubjectivity” that “is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation” (33), and of the cultural politics that underlie various representations of Aboriginality (28). But despite its problems as an evaluative category, authenticity can be vital to indigenous artists as part of the strategic assertion of cultural identity; as far as Tovey is concerned, a distinction between, in his terms, “phony” (qtd. in McCarthy 3) and authentic Dreamtime symbolism was crucial to the representation of Aboriginality in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Authenticity seems to be an inescapable, and perhaps even *necessary*, critical value; for Tovey, it was a touchstone by which to articulate the integrity of his work.

As well as generating crosscurrents in relation to cultural authenticity, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* received negative criticism over its perceived lack of political themes. In an oblique comment, critic John McCallum suggests that the politics of Tovey’s work constituted a submission to non-indigenous interests: “White audiences who think they might be threatened or alienated by an indigenous festival needn’t worry ... *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* ... is respectful to a fault, with no hint of radical revision or overtly political intent. It makes no attempt to appropriate this European classic for new purposes” (14). If the production risked reinforcing a mainstream acceptance of non-confrontational, “approved versions” of Aboriginal performance (Gilbert, “Reconciliation?” 73), this was weighed, for Festival Director Rhoda Roberts, with the opportunity to challenge the dominant corralling of Aboriginality into issues-based politics; as Michelle Hanna explains, “Roberts was intent that people would see the ‘other side’ not shown in the media, which was possible as the Festival had extensive media coverage outside the context of socio-political problems” (74).

McCallum’s reluctance to define Tovey’s representation of Aboriginality in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a new purpose reflects a politicized view of how Aboriginal artists should engage with European texts. This view is situated along racialized lines: McCallum notes that the design of the production “establishes a white-black, court-woods distinction that is not carried over into the casting” (14). Similarly, Waites argued that the play missed an opportunity to construct a commentary on contemporary race-relations: “I did ... wonder what it would have looked like if Aboriginal imagery had dominated the court (claiming superior civilisation) and the animality and rabble of the forest had been delegated to the whites” (14). By making reference to a “white” presence that was absent from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, these critical observations conflate its use of Elizabethan imagery with a race-relations discourse that it did not engage. Rather than explicate Aboriginality vis-à-vis white Australia, Tovey’s work foregrounded Aboriginality in and of itself; the dominant body of the white Australian actor did not constitute even a peripheral presence.

### **Playing *Othello***

Given that *Othello* has become a modern performative template for the elucidation of racial prejudice, from Paul Robeson’s work in London in 1930 and the United States in the 1940s to John Kani’s performances towards the end of the apartheid era in South Africa and recent performances by Māori actors in New Zealand, it is surprising that Aboriginal performers have rarely played the title role in Australian productions. Malaysian-born Australian director and choreographer Kai Tai Chan’s 1989 adaptation of the play appears to have been the first professional casting of an Aboriginal actor (Kim Walker) as Othello. It was not until 2006 that another indigenous Australian, Tom E. Lewis, performed the role for the Darwin Theatre Company (DTC) in a production directed by John du Feu (DTC presented the work in Townsville, Queensland the following

year). In 2007, indigenous actor Wayne Blair played Othello in Bell Shakespeare Company's (BSC) touring production, directed by Marion Potts.

Unlike Phillips's *The Tempest* and Tovey's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, neither the Northern-Territory-based Darwin Theatre Company's work nor the Sydney-based Bell Shakespeare's production emphasized an Australian Aboriginal context via their set designs. A reviewer of du Feu's production observed, "The men's costumes could pass for those of old-time soldiers or characters from Star Trek" ("Dark Drama" 35). A critic of Potts's production commented, "The set is spare, allowing the drama to take centre stage" (Yanko 25). In both productions, the characterization of Othello did not engage a specifically Aboriginal perspective. While du Feu observes that Lewis's position as a professionally successful person who has experienced racial prejudice informed the actor's presence in the DTC production, noting, "He's a Northern Territory man, and a lot of his history is reflected in the kind of dichotomy that's contained in Othello" (qtd. in Wilson 14), he maintains that the production is not an explication of Northern Territory or broader Australian race-relations: "We've taken it out of time" (qtd. in Wilson 14). De Feu describes the thematic focus of *Othello* in universal terms: "the play speaks strongly about relationships between black and white communities ... Othello is representative of a black culture treated badly by the mainstream white community" (qtd. in "Othello Arrives" 7). For Lewis, the issue of racism is of less interest in his portrayal of Othello than the affective terrain of romantic love (Wilson 14).

Potts shied decisively away from the specificity of Aboriginal Australian politics in her production for the BSC, maintaining, "Productions that update so specifically are often reductive ... The play to me really sheds light on the human condition. A reading that would favour race relations only would work to the detriment of those other levels" (qtd. in Iaccarino 13). Elsewhere, Potts goes so far as to obliterate Blair's Aboriginality within the context of the production: "I chose deliberately not to set it in Australia in 2007 and Wayne isn't playing an Aboriginal character" (qtd. in Perkin 11). In line with Potts's intention, one critic asserted that the BSC production was aided by Blair's "dignified, non-specific blackness" ("Othello: Cover Story" 4)—a comment that seems to prompt the question of what a *specific* (historically, culturally, ethnically) blackness might consist of. The argument for a performer's Aboriginality to be disconnected from his portrayal of Othello is problematic, even contradictory, inasmuch as it seeks to conflate a play about racial otherness and prejudice with a form of colour-blind (or at least ethnicity-blind) casting. In Potts's case in particular, the desire to render Blair's indigenous identity invisible ignores Australia's particular performance history: the rarity of Aboriginal actors in the role of Othello means that directors risk complicity in further erasure if they do not strategically and politically foreground what has been long absent.

While many critics observed that Blair embodied a despecified, "universal" Othello in the STC production, some perceived in his performance explicit Aboriginality. Alison Croggon discerned that Blair expressed himself in a corporeal language that was at odds with his speech: "Blair speaks with a

gravity and precision that expresses the care and containment of an outsider who must watch his every word and act, lest he transgress; and yet his stance, his movement, is inflected throughout the play with the tropes of Aboriginal dance” (n.p.). Blair’s background as a performer of traditional Aboriginal dance can account for Croggon’s observation. Critic Jason Blake also pointed to the ways in which Blair’s Aboriginality manifested in the work: “Othello is a Moor but Blair’s heritage informs everything he does on stage: the way Othello moves (the physical expression of his jealousy contains faint echoes of indigenous dance); the way he interacts with others (his rank-pulling is circumspect, his gaze often indirect)” (22). For these observers, Potts’s work was inevitably imbricated in, and provoked engagement with, the historico-political context of its casting.

Despite the de-emphasis on Aboriginality within the BSC’s production, and to a less emphatic extent the DTC’s production, the mere fact of casting an indigenous actor prefaced most critical responses to both works. Several described Lewis’s casting as unprecedented in Australia. This omission of Walker’s performance nearly two decades earlier may be defended on the grounds that Chan’s work was an *adaptation* of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. However, the claims of several journalists that the BSC’s production was the first by a professional theatre company to feature an indigenous performer as Othello are certainly untenable. Rosalie Higson’s comment is representative of a general critical inattentiveness to the Darwin work and a celebratory emphasis on the innovation of the considerably more famous John Bell and his company: “Wayne Blair is about to make stage history as the first Aborigine to play the leading role in a major production of *Othello*” (“Aborigine Now Very Moorish” 3). The BSC’s publicity noted that the work was Bell’s first ever production of the play; contradicting somewhat Potts’s creative emphasis on racial non-specificity, Bell explains his company’s principle that the role “had to be [played by] an indigenous Australian actor”, and that no such actor had until then proven capable: “It’s a major role for a mature actor and in my opinion we haven’t had actors experienced enough to take it on until now” (qtd. in Taylor, “Australia Needs Moor” 21). Numerous reviewers echoed this rationale: “John Bell waited 17 years for an Aboriginal actor to play the tormented Othello” (Kizilos 17); “The buzz about Bell Shakespeare’s first production of *Othello* is that the company found an Aboriginal actor (Wayne Blair) to play the title role” (Yanko 25). The emphasis on the BSC production’s supposed absence of a precedent highlights the issue of cultural status: Bell’s high-profile company attracts more widespread and rigorous critical engagement in the media than the work of the DTC, centred in the comparatively remote Northern Territory capital city.

Bell’s claim that an Aboriginal actor had not previously been ready to play the role of Othello was rarely questioned in media responses to the BSC’s production. Lee Lewis, Australian director and author of the Currency House Platform essay, *Cross-Racial Casting: Changing the Face of Australian Theatre* (2007), maintains that there is cause for concern when the casting of an indigenous Othello constitutes an innovation; identifying an entrenched Eurocentric bias within mainstream Australian theatre casting, Lewis remarks of the BSC’s production:

I'd be more impressed if [Blair] was Hamlet or King Lear ...  
 I think that Wayne Blair as Othello should be normal to us.  
 When [Bell] comes out and says he's been waiting 17 years for  
 someone capable of playing it, I'd like to go back and talk to  
 some actors that feel they were capable of playing it years ago".  
 (Qtd. in Higson, "All White" 8)

Certainly, the minor but persistent presence of Aboriginal performers in major Shakespearean roles in Australia demands that the issue of capability and experience be carefully interrogated, and weighed alongside more challenging questions of educational and professional opportunity and societal prejudice.

### **Community Relationships: The Australian Shakespeare Company**

The Melbourne-based Australian Shakespeare Company (ASC), which under the Artistic Directorship of Glenn Elston has become a major producer of popular outdoor theatre in Australia, regularly engages with indigenous communities and artists in metropolitan and remote locations. Most recently, the company's 2007-08 Melbourne production of *Romeo and Juliet* featured indigenous actors Kylie Farmer (as Juliet) and Kamahi Djordon King (as Tybalt, reprising a role he performed several years earlier in Rider's *Romeo and Juliet*). In addition to these colour-blind casting practices, the ASC has established an ongoing community relationship; every year since 2002, it has co-produced the Northern Territory performance event, "Walking With Spirits", in partnership with the Djilpin Arts Aboriginal Corporation. An initiative of the Wugularr (Beswick) community, the event combines corroboree, dance, music, puppetry, film and fire to interpret traditional stories. It has given rise to some unique convergences: during "Walking With Spirits" in 2003, the ASC performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in 2005 they presented a musical version of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

The relationship between the ASC and the Wugularr community enables the creative enrichment of both; as Tom E. Lewis, artistic director of "Walking With Spirits", explains in a letter to Glenn Elston, the indigenous community was able "to see a style of theatre that is largely unfamiliar to them, and is presented in their second or third language" (n.p.). The benefits are, in Lewis's view, practical as well as creative: "Companies don't come here because it's inaccessible (culturally and geographically), too expensive and doesn't pay. ... When housing, health and education are in crisis, art and culture usually miss out. ... without in-kind support from the Shakespeare Company ... Walking With Spirits could not have happened at the level it did" (n.p.). When most performative interactions between Shakespeare's texts and indigenous artists and cultures take place in urban, professional or semi-professional theatre contexts, the ASC has established a unique and ongoing point of community-based contact far from the metropolitan centres.

The relationship with Wugularr also highlights an important point about the ASC's engagement with indigenous artists and communities: that the company is not solely concerned with centralizing Shakespeare's texts as

the site for creative transaction, and of reinforcing ideas about Shakespearean cross-cultural universality; certainly, the annual Walking With Spirits event exceeds the playwright from whom ASC takes its name, even as it draws the interests of the metropolitan theatre company and the remote community into conjunction through performance. Most recently, Elston and ASC produced Noel Tovey’s autobiographical solo show, *Little Black Bastard*, which was presented at Melbourne’s Athenaeum Theatre in June 2010 and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2010. If Tovey set out in 1997 to represent Aboriginal identities in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, to stake a claim in a playwright who for so long had been the preserve of white Australians, in 2010 his ally was figured into the background, an embedded part of the theatrical structure that backed Tovey’s own deeply personal performance of self-identity.

In *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier assert that Shakespeare’s “complicity with oppression ... is never necessarily the whole story” (12). The performative engagements with Shakespeare that I have examined here fill some of the gaps and spaces in this story, highlighting the capacity of theatre to (re)present classic texts. Fundamentally, the works serve to interrogate received modes of thinking about and seeing both Shakespeare and Aboriginality in Australia. As his oeuvre is taken up and made to function in Australian theatre in order to speak to a range of themes and concerns, be they Aboriginal or otherwise, “Shakespeare” as icon, symbol and storyteller gradually morphs into an ever more complex source and vehicle for diverse communications and encounters.

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