



EXCLUSIVE
COMPLIMENTARY
SOUVENIR PROGRAMME

MAKING A SHOW OF IT

INDIGENOUS ENTERTAINERS AND ENTREPRENEURS IN 1950S MELBOURNE

Curated by Virginia Fraser & Destiny Deacon

AT THE CITY GALLERY,
MELBOURNE TOWN HALL
SWANSTON SREET

Aboriginal Tribes and Customs

Since the first white settlement was established in Australia in 1788, the origin of the Australian aborigine has been a subject of great interest to scientists and laymen, but is still an unsolved problem. It is generally believed, however, that the aborigines first came to Australia as a gradual infiltration of family and larger groups which migrated from Northern islands.

It is estimated that there were about 200 tribes, each in its own territory, and a total aboriginal population of about 500,000 when the white man first came to Australia. Today, there remain only about 10,000 full-blooded natives, the greater proportion of whom live on Government or missionary stations, work on cattle and sheep stations, in the road and other camps, on trading and pearling luggers, and in other tasks.

Some tribes still live a nomadic way of life in remote parts of Western and Northern Australia. We have illustrated and often explained the aborigines in the past.

But in the future it should be our duty to help them to live in our own society instead of regarding them as outsiders. With wider knowledge of their fascinating customs, legends and tribal laws, and great official interest in this simple nomadic people, this objective may one day be achieved. In the meantime, it is hoped that the brief outline of their way of life as presented in this production, will serve as a worthwhile contribution to a greater understanding and appreciation of the first true Australians.

Extract from the research of
FREDERICK D. MCCARTHY,
Curator of Anthropology,
Australian Museum, Sydney.



Jean Campbell

The scriptress of "OUT OF THE DARK" is, in the public domain, "an aborigine" of Melbourne. She is one of Australia's authors, and also a well-known amateur actress, having been associated with the Melbourne Little Theatre for many years. In the scripting of "OUT OF THE DARK" her literary and theatrical talents were united with high artistic effect.



Irene Mitchell

A native of Melbourne and director of the Melbourne Little Theatre, Irene Mitchell has come to "OUT OF THE DARK" after a long experience of producing theatricals. Her gifts for handling human material, the insight with which she interprets a dramatic script, and the outstanding originality of her approach to "Theatre" make her one of Australia's leading producers.



Harold Blair

Harold Blair, the first Australian Aboriginal to become a concert singer, returned this year as one of the Jubilee artists for the A.B.C.

Since he went to America eighteen months ago, on the recommendation of Todd Duncan, the negro baritone, Harold Blair has had valuable experience in that country. Not long before leaving for his present home-coming tour, Blair had a conspicuous success at a New York recital, arranged by the Australian-American Society.

The American critics were of the same unanimous opinion in predicting a big future for the Australian tenor.

Georgia Lee

This fascinating singer, both from Cairns and began her theatrical career during the Second World War in Red Cross entertainments, particularly with the John Wayne unit. She then toured throughout Queensland and New South Wales with the St. Louis Varieties. This was followed by important engagements in Town, Palestine and A.B.C. Productions.

One of the most colourful phases of her colourful career was when she sang at the exclusive night club, "Africana".

Mrs Lee is at present delighting after theatre patron of "Clio's", Melbourne's own night club.

Her part in the Aboriginal "Moomba" "Out of the Dark" is the fruition of a lifelong ambition to appear in an Aboriginal theatrical production.



1 Glamour from the second half of the show, including Joyce Johnson (centre, in white), Joan Saunders (further right), Mervyn Williams (second from right) and Eric Onus (far right).

2 Theatre program centre pages.

3 Program note on Aboriginal Tribes and Customs.

4 Bios of An Aboriginal Moomba 'scriptress', Jean Campbell, and director, Irene Mitchell.

5 An Aboriginal Moomba stars Harold Blair and Georgia Lee program bios.

6 Cabaret singer, Georgia Lee, in costume as Nerida from An Aboriginal Moomba.

7 Jacob Chirside as Toolaba, the chieftain.

8 Pam Nicholls (left) and Eileen Young (right) on set with a stuffed dingo.

9 Showman, Bill Onus, in costume on the set of: An Aboriginal Moomba.

THIS EXHIBITION BEGAN WITH THE DISCOVERY, IN THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE VICTORIA, OF A PROGRAM AND ABOUT A DOZEN SMALL BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM A NOW ALMOST FORGOTTEN 1951 PRODUCTION AT THE PRINCESS THEATRE, MELBOURNE...



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An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark was forced into being primarily through the efforts of Pastor Doug Nicholls in response to a total lack of Indigenous content in the Victorian Centenary celebrations.ⁱ

On a grant of two thousand pounds wrung from the State Government, with acts and artists assembled by Aboriginal activist, showman and entrepreneur, Bill Onus, and with the co-operation of non-Indigenous theatre professionals including writer Jean Campbell, director Irene Mitchell and Garnet Carroll, the Princess's proprietor, *An Aboriginal Moomba* was put together in a matter of weeks.

It showcased both ancient and modern Indigenous culture, its cast drawn from Melbourne, NSW and Cherbourg, Queensland Aboriginal communities, plus professional Indigenous musicians including opera singer, Harold Blair, and cabaret artist, Georgia Lee (both later internationally known).

Dancing, singing, fire, snake handling, and boomerangs flying through the auditorium over the heads of the audience, clearly made it an exciting and highly theatrical event. Drawing as much on vaudeville and cabaret conventions as Aboriginal traditions, the production satisfied a huge appetite among non-Indigenous Australians for attractive and excitingly presented information about Aboriginal life. In 1951, the Princess Theatre seated over 2000, and this unusual show played to full houses plus standing room for most of its short run, drawing around 12,000 people to five performances, along with an enormous amount of media attention.

However, well-publicised plans to repeat it for the King (who died not long after), and tour interstate and overseas evaporated. And public romanticisation of the Queenslanders in the cast belied their actual situation. Most, including Jacob Chirnside, dubbed 'The Chief' by newspapers, were, in effect, wards of the state. Under the 1939 Queensland Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act, they needed permission to travel, or indeed act effectively on many other of their own decisions.

Unfortunately it's not as hard as it ought to be to imagine the highhanded way in which Aboriginal people have often been treated by government bodies charged with protection. The following story about an early would-be, small-time entertainment entrepreneur makes the point.

The 1912 correspondence file of the SA Chief Protector of Aborigines, W G South, showed applications for small parcels of land from six Nunga men. The SA Crown Lands Act of 1888 allowed leasehold grants of up to 160 acres to Aborigines, but the new SA Aborigines Act of 1911 gave the Protector great powers, which he exercised by ignoring all six requests.

Four years later, one of those refused, Albert Karloan, again wrote to the Protector, this time seeking a loan of 150 pounds to buy a 'cinematograph outfit', including a "Machine and all necessary parts", which he had already located.

His plan was to 'travel the country in company with my Son Clement giving entertainment of illustrated Songs and Recitation by Slide pictures as well as Film Pictures'.

The book, *Survival in Our Own Land: Aboriginal Experiences in South Australia since 1836*ⁱⁱ, from which this story and these quotes come, includes a facsimile of Karloan's letter, in copperplate writing, also proposing terms for repayment.

At this time, early in the motion picture industry, travelling shows setting up in tents, halls and outdoors, particularly outside capital cities, were common, and probably more common in Australia than anywhere else, according to the book, *The Pictures That Moved*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Several Australian-made films had already included Aboriginal themes or characters (though some were played in blackface by white actors).^{iv} Only six years later, Aboriginal boxer, Sandy McVea, had a major role as offside to the non-Indigenous star (and fellow boxer) Snowy Baker, in the dramatic feature, *The Enemy Within*.

So, Karloan's was not a fanciful project, either in terms of the business idea itself, nor his wish, as an Aboriginal person, to be involved in the new medium. His problem was being detained under the Act on the Point McLeay Mission where he was unable to fund his enterprise without Government co-operation.

While the Mission superintendent supported Karloan's application, the Protector called it 'ridiculous'. His scorn cloaked the administrative aim of keeping people on missions and reserves by suppressing outside employment opportunities. Such requests were 'becoming frequent', he complained to the SA Commissioner of Public Works. 'If one native be assisted it brings heaps of other requests.'

Similar social engineering legislation existed in other states, including Victoria where the 1910 Aborigines Protection Act served the same purpose. Nonetheless, many Aboriginal people, like the principals in *An Aboriginal Moomba*, did live outside and worked against its reach.

Not so the Arrente artist, Albert Namatjira, who allowed one of his works to be translated into the backdrop for *An Aboriginal Moomba*. After a successful third Melbourne exhibition in 1948, he faced interference in reasonable ambitions when refused a Northern Territory grazing lease. Again, in 1951, his attempt to build a house in Alice Springs was blocked because it didn't fit the economic strategy favoured for Aborigines by two bodies with power over them -- the Lutheran Mission at

Hermansberg and the Native Affairs Branch of the NT Administration.

In this political and legislative environment, *An Aboriginal Moomba* was unusual in getting government support, media attention, and the co-operation of influential non-Indigenous professionals for an ambitious Aboriginal project.

It was nevertheless neither anomalous, nor the first or the last show of its kind. Previously Bill Onus, and his brother, Eric, had staged several similarly constructed entertainments as entrepreneurs, including their 1949 *Corroboree* at Wirth's Olympia on the site now occupied by the Victorian Arts Centre.

An even longer history of Aboriginal entertainment entrepreneurship includes both individual and collective projects with a mixture of artistic, cultural, financial and political motives. For instance, the Wallaga Lake gumleaf orchestra toured widely during the 1920s, as did the Cumeragunja vaudeville troupe. A photo in *Buried Country*, Clinton Walker's book about Australian Indigenous country music, shows the combined groups in the 1930s before a banner with the father of entertainer, Jimmy Little, in the front row.

Jimmy Little's parents were vaudevillians who arranged travelling entertainments to Aboriginal mission settlements. Little's father, he said, 'would also organise teams of our people to give concerts throughout the district to raise funds for the mission'.

According to historian, Gary Foley, the Onus brothers' nephew, Bruce McGuinness, staged shows based on his uncles' format in Melbourne into the 1970s.

Nevertheless, there are more ways than one to skin a cat, and Bill Onus's lifelong activism for Aborigines, and his wide association with people both Aboriginal and not, some of them communists, attracted the attention of Australian security organisations. On their recommendation, in 1952, he was denied a visa to enter America to demonstrate boomerang throwing.

Not long after, Bill Onus sank an accident compensation payment into a new manufacturing and retail business, Aboriginal Enterprises, which eventually opened shops selling furnishings, artefacts and novelties in Belgrave, Narbethong, and Port Augusta, South Australia. The Belgrave shop -- the first -- included a workshop, employed a full-time (non-Indigenous) designer, Paula Kerry (now Paula O'Dare), commissioned objects from other makers, and imported artefacts from all over Australia.

A big local employer, the business supported many workers both black and white, and was one of two Dandenongs tourist attractions drawing celebrated overseas visitors as well as local tourists. Bill Onus's home movie footage shows

newly famous calypso singer, Harry Belafonte, watched by Doug Nicholls, learning to throw one of Aboriginal Enterprises' boomerangs. Other star shoppers included Beatle, John Lennon, and TV stars, the Mousketeers, from Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club*.

Later in the 1960s, Bill Onus had his own ABC TV series, *Alcheringa*, in which he introduced and commented on dramatised aspects of Victorian Aboriginal life before colonisation.

Paradoxically for the assimilationist 1950s, the reviews for *An Aboriginal Moomba* were wildly approving of the first part of the show -- the traditional part, as the critics thought of it -- but generally dismissive of the second half, which featured Indigenous performers already successful in the white world.

Today, this evaluation is often reversed, with the specifically south-east Australian Aboriginal cultural production of that period read as inauthentic or kitsch. But it can be seen just as plausibly as a completely authentic expression of contemporary Aboriginality after well over a century of relentless outside manipulation and interference.

The two projects featured in this exhibition, with their pan-Aboriginal eclecticism, their accommodations with and employment of non-Indigenous people and means, and the focused resourcefulness of their originators, projected an Aboriginal presence into a wider world -- both Indigenous and non-Indigenous -- than they emerged from.

Today they can give us a feel of the relatively small but expanding public social and aesthetic space shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people around Melbourne fifty years ago, on the way to now.

Virginia Fraser
July 2008

9 The first half of "An Aboriginal Moomba" in front of Dres Hardringham's set based on an Albert Namatjira painting, "The Monoliths of the Legendary Euros".

10 Bill Onus eats fire in an *An Aboriginal Moomba*, with Jacob Chirnside at the back) and other performers from Cherbourg, Queensland.

11 Snake and handler leave the stage. Note the south-east Australian design at the right of the set.

12 No wonder the audience was impressed! Bill Onus makes a show of fire.

13 Handbill for entrepreneur W (Bill) Onus's 1949 *Corroboree* at Wirths Olympia -- a precursor of *An Aboriginal Moomba*.

EXHIBITION DATES: 8 TO 20 JUL. AUG. MONDAY 10 TO 2 AM PM TUE. TO THU. 11 TO 6 AM PM FRIDAY 11 TO 6³⁰ AM PM SATURDAY 10 TO 2 AM PM CITY GALLERY MELBOURNE TOWN HALL SWANSTON STREET CITY GALLERY PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE VICTORIA City of Melbourne Living the Arts