

THE ABORIGINAL VOICE

JEFF MCMULLEN

The Aboriginal voice is bursting from the page, the stage and the screen.

In newspapers and novels, on television and radio, through feature films, documentaries, theatre, dance, song-writing and cultural festivals, as well as thousands of websites, DVDs and e-letters, the diversity of Indigenous Australian voices now being heard is unprecedented.

There is reason for pride and even joy that humanity's oldest unbroken chain of storytellers today is reaching more people around the world than ever before.

The challenge remains, however, and it is as difficult as ever, to shatter the matrix of control and assimilation of Aboriginal people expressed through virtually every major Government policy. Attempts to 'modernize', relocate or otherwise socially engineer Indigenous cultures have never been abandoned in this country.

The Australian mass media attempts to strangle the Aboriginal voice. Media monopolies manipulate the mainstream view, trapping Aboriginal people in stereotypes of victimhood and hopelessness.

Mass media is the principal propaganda machine marketing a neo-liberal vision aimed ultimately at dispossessing the First Australians of their land and distinctiveness.

The mainstream media's message does not invite non-Indigenous Australians to be more like the traditional custodians but instead insists that Aboriginal Culture is the problem and Aboriginal people must change.

As Dr Chris Sarra has written, there is a prevailing narrative in which "Western influence is seen as progressive and good, and the enemy is Culture and tradition."

There is a magnificent irony here that as the assimilation forces increase their pressure to suffocate Aboriginal voices, a new creativity erupts, as talented people find startling ways of being heard.

Gurumul Yunupingu is a voice steeped in culture and personal tonal quality that finds centre stage in the mainstream to defy the Culture War warriors. Steven and David Page have built a magnificent repertoire of Bangarra Dance performances to connect modern audiences with powerful stories evolving through collaboration with traditional voices. Iven Sen's films, *Beneath Clouds* and *Toomelah* show real Aboriginal people, not stereotypes, and we see clearly that "modernization" brings an equal measure of dislocation, alienation and defiance, the price of neo-liberal 'progress'.

Take it from a storyteller who has spent more than half a century wandering the world and squeezed at least ten lifetimes into one, in the face of greed, cruelty and denial, the truth and the power of words are always the best weapons.

The power of Indigenous Australians will never be in numbers but in the strength, beauty and truthfulness of the stories that rise up from the land and the sea, defining what it is to be here, what it means for all of us to be *Australian*.

I have often discussed with my dear friend, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, who starred in that first Australian colour film, *Jedda*, how the storytellers have the greatest capacity to shape white perceptions of Aboriginal people. Rosalie herself is a truly unforgettable communicator, a striking picture of stature and grace, who can stand in front of a Tent Embassy crowd or measure her words on the ABC Television's *Q & A* program to convey a seriousness of purpose that is sadly lacking in our Parliament on those rare occasions when consideration of an Aboriginal future is ever raised.

It is the Aboriginal Voice that shows the way ahead.

Consider the impact of the first instalment of the *Redfern* series on ABC Television, as those highly gifted and original directors, Rachel Perkins and Wayne Blair, captured a national audience with drama set in perhaps the most vilified few blocks of Aboriginal family life anywhere in this country.

The force and realism of *Redfern* literally introduced many white Australians to urban Aboriginal life beyond the stereotypes. Brilliant Aboriginal actors worked alongside community characters and local legends that many of us know and love, creating such an impact that a second series was inevitable. The strength of the writing, direction and performances lifted this series above most contemporary Australian television drama and challenged others to open their eyes.

I recall the same magnificent stirring of conscience that occurred as my wife, Kim and I watched Richard Frankland's play, *Conversations with the Dead*, with Wayne Blair playing one of the investigators of so many Black Deaths in Custody. Frankland is another prolific Aboriginal writer, poet, playwright and filmmaker whose lifework has helped express the array of contributions by so many Aboriginal warriors. As we sat in the theatre, challenged by Wayne Blair's oratory, we wanted the walls of the theatre to come down and for everyone in the nation to stand there in a prison cell and be connected to the pain and the loss. If only people listened and understood, surely they would act? This is the yearning that keep humanity alive.

By casting himself in the *Redfern* series as the troubled community cop haunted by the agonizing death in custody of a man he knew all too well, Wayne Blair's voice again calls out to us to wake up, to think deeply about what is happening in so many places from Palm Island to Alice Springs and in the desert of Western Australia. More than anything we are asked to hear the voices of our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings.

As in their cinematic films, *Bran Nue Dae* and *The Sapphires*, Rachel Perkins and Wayne Blair present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as authentic and complex characters at the centre of the drama, rather than as mere minor figures on the fringes of white society. Given that most non-Indigenous Australians do not have any close relationship with even a single Aboriginal family, this kind of writing and performance can have an extraordinarily valuable impact.

Early Aboriginal film makers like Bruce McGuinness and writers, playwrights and poets like Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, would be wondering how today's storytellers have slipped the shackles and the government gags.

Over the past decade, Noel Pearson's regular columns in *The Weekend Australian* have exerted considerable influence over the thinking of conservative white Australians who are eager to blame the victims and escape major responsibility for on-going disadvantage, discrimination and injustice. No other Aboriginal voice has been given such relentless promotion by an ideologically focussed media monopoly.

Professor Marcia Langton has contributed to Aboriginal history programs like the SBS series, *The First Australians* but it is her prolific writing in News Limited publications, as well as major journals and her recent ABC Radio series of Boyer Lectures that has conveyed her distinctive vision of mining as the major investor in future Aboriginal development.

While I wince at the folly of pinning Aboriginal hope of change on neo-liberal capitalism that is based on acquisition through dispossession, it is not only useful but necessary for Australians to see conflicting Aboriginal perspectives set out clearly in a national newspaper or on the national broadcaster. While sometimes the tone is personal and bitter, it is a necessary part of debate for all Australians to be exposed to the many different views held by Aboriginal people.

I still believe like many of you, however, that mainstream media is favouring a few Aboriginal voices and censoring the views of so many others who deserve to be heard.

Gary Foley has written on his Koori history website how the very first "all Aboriginal television show", *Basically Black*, went to air in 1973 (when the screens were still black and white) with the opening line, "Welcome to colour television." That confronting mixture of comedy, satire and ridicule emerged from the Redfern based National Black Theatre. But for television audiences it was toned down by the ABC TV bosses because the striking critique, particularly the attacks on racism, were judged unacceptable.

Foley's mocking treatment of racists, hypocrites, lying politicians and rapacious exploiters of Aboriginal lands is still considered too hot for Australian mainstream television today and yet he challenges packed audiences at the Sydney Opera House.

On ABC Television, political censorship of highly contentious Aboriginal voices continues.

After Dr Djinyini Gondarra, the Yolgnu statesman, travelled to Geneva to plead with the UN to end the Australian Government's discrimination under the Northern Territory Intervention, he was puzzled that the national television network would not broadcast his anti-Intervention documentary, *Our Generation*.

This raw plea from many Yolgnu voices to end the oppression of the Intervention was directed by Sinem Saban and Damien Curtis, with Djinyini Gondarra, John Butler and myself as co-producers.

The film was judged *Best Campaign Documentary* at the London International Documentary Film Festival in 2011, arousing large audiences at overseas screenings but it could not get an airing on Australia's national network. Instead we have travelled the country for more than three years renting cinemas and halls to screen this truthful story.

Often Djinyini Gondarra is asked, 'why isn't your film on the ABC?' The truthful answer is that the Government's funding of the national broadcaster maintains a constant influence over its editorial content.

When Aboriginal voices like that of Rosalie Kunoth-Monk or Archie Roach are heard on ABC Television so many people comment that they have a dignity and humility that sets them above the idle and self-serving chatter. We should see more interesting Aboriginal people interviewed on television about all aspects of Australian life, not only those the media managers decide they should be linked to.

I know that we should be thankful for any degree of independence that lingers at the ABC. Occasionally *Four Corners* does impinge with a provocative revelation such as Liz Jackson's report on the tragic and unnecessary loss of the elder, Mr Ward, left to die in the heat of a prison transport vehicle.

More often than not it is Australia's Aboriginal media that is carrying the load of investigating the on-going injustices. Eventually it was the National Indigenous Television Network (NITV) that first screened the anti-Intervention documentary, *Our Generation*.

The launch of the National Indigenous Television Network as a free-to-air channel is an important milestone allowing even more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be seen, heard and understood with a new context and clarity. It is surprising just how many non-Indigenous Australians are suddenly 'discovering' through NITV the diverse ways Indigenous people see the world.

Pioneering Aboriginal journalists like the late John Newfong would be grinning from ear to ear to see NITV's energetic Canberra correspondent, Jeremy Geia, scooping the mainstream media by interviewing Julian Assange at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

Stan Grant, returning from his world wandering with CNN, now hosts a new NITV program, *AWAKEN* (6pm on Friday nights) as well as anchoring Sky TV's *NEWSNIGHT WITH STAN GRANT* (Monday to Thursday). After some 14 years of overseas reporting it is good to see Stan home again, standing near Uluru with Rhoda Roberts and Ernie Dingo celebrating the distinctive voices of so many great Aboriginal performers or bringing his skills to the studio discussions with a wider perspective.

Like that charming man of words, John Newfong, who travelled to Uganda to report on Idi Amin's grab for power, experienced Aboriginal storytellers like Stan Grant are aware of the global struggles. It brings a useful breadth to the discussion when reporters have experienced the dispossession and oppression suffered by other peoples and also the hopeful changes that are occurring in many parts of the world.

Remember well that NITV exists today as a free to air network only after a long campaign to keep alive this fundamental cultural right to be heard. Rationalising resources under the umbrella of SBS can lead to cost sharing and genuine collaboration. But NITV will rise or fall on the leadership skills, creativity and courage of its Aboriginal management.

Tanya Denning, a former ABC reporter, is the Channel Manager. Prize winning video-journalist, Angela Bates heads the news and current affairs division. They are the kind of seasoned storytellers who know how to listen and have a genuine sense of responsibility.

There is a variety of life experience here, many different styles and shades of creativity particularly among NITV's women broadcasters including director Susan Moylan-Coombs, former NT politician and journalist, Malarndirri McCarthy, *Living Black's* presenter Karla Grant and news anchor, Natalie Ahmat.

What the Aboriginal media does not need is self-absorbed show ponies. Don't mimic the mainstream. Be yourself. Find your own voice.

The compelling reason for independent Aboriginal journalism, to echo Kevin Gilbert's words, is "Because A White Man'll Never Do It." With a federal election looming and the prospect of new Indigenous political candidates reporters need to avoid the usual political spin and concentrate with unwavering determination on the issues of genuine concern to Aboriginal people.

CAAMA'S on line news output in Alice Springs often leads the way in going that extra mile to convey what communities have to say. Here is a relatively small and youthful team that stretches what is possible by embracing remote mobile technology to give isolated communities a sense of belonging to our wider society.

There has been an astonishing output from CAAMA, including documentary films like Tom E. Lewis's *Yeller Feller* and Warwick Thornton's brilliant film, *Green Bush*, which gave us an early glimpse of his eye for character that later would be fully realized in his unsettling masterpiece, *Samson and Delilah*.

International viewers always ask me why do the Alice Spring white folk turn away from Delilah as she tries to look into their eyes and connect as a human being? Why don't the people so busy at lunch hear her voice?

This is the power realized by Aboriginal storytellers.

Although, intentionally, I have left Aboriginal newspapers until last, I hope by now you may share in my belief that the emergence of Aboriginal voices is reason for hopefulness.

THE TRACKER'S Aboriginal editor, Amy McGuire, has been determined to shape a monthly magazine agenda that combines provocative quality writing, cultural richness and history, a brand of journalism that takes its readers seriously. I know no Australian journalist who works harder at this demanding task. And it is why, out of respect, that I contribute a column here for you.

Steven Hagan's editorial season at *The National Indigenous Times* also has extended its influence and usefulness by producing a weekly roundup of national news focussing on the major Indigenous stories.

As well readers have the community billboard style of Kirstie Parker's *The Koori Mail*, *Vibe Magazine* and Neil Wilmet's Aboriginal *Business Magazine*, to name just some of the publications expanding the available information about Aboriginal life.

Aboriginal academics contribute to many fine university journals. Some like Professor Larissa Behrendt and Anita Heiss also write novels and other books that convey their stories with imaginative freshness. Old Aboriginal storytellers like Albert Holt and Ernie Grant are cheered to see so many impressive Aboriginal people bursting into print. There are Aboriginal bloggers, rappers and songwriters working away right now. The e-lines are humming and those early pamphleteers from the Rights Movement in the 1930s would be thrilled at the changes coming down the line.

When I think back to the breakthrough years of John Newfong, here was the original Aboriginal journalist who did not see any dilemma between being an activist and a professional writer. He wrote with distinction on Aboriginal rights, politics, health and the arts and it was always his way with words and his truthfulness that made prime ministers and newspaper editors take notice.

So raise your voice and use every breath!

