

ADAM SHOEMAKER: An Interview with Jack Davis

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Q: I have before me your two published anthologies of verse, *The First-Born and Other Poems* and *Jagardoo: Poems From Aboriginal Australia*.(1) I understand that there is a third volume in the works; can you tell me anything about it?

DAVIS: I sent away seventy-two poems to the University of Queensland Press and I told them, 'They may be too long or they may not be good enough, and the climate mightn't be right for publishing them', and I was right in one respect because there were too many poems, so what they've done is they've divided them into two volumes. One half will be for children and the other half will be for young adults. No definite date on publication.

Q: Kath Walker also seems to be writing for a younger audience these days, because she feels most Australian adults are 'mentally constipated'. Do you agree with her?

DAVIS: I think when you're my age and her age, you go through a period of writing for adults, and then you sort of reach a saturation point in your own mind and you want to get onto another level or a different medium. So, you know, writing for children: you go onto that-it comes much easier-it's an easier platform to work for.

Q: Have you really reached your saturation point yet?

DAVIS: Well, in fact, I've got a novel three parts finished about a boy-a partAboriginal boy who lives in a white environment, from when he's five until he's ten years of age. Of course I won't finish that until next year some time.

Q: Is that set in an urban environment?

DAVIS: Yes.

Q: So it's not really an autobiographical work?

DAVIS: No, it's a fictionalized account of my own life as a child. I would say it's 30 per cent fiction and the rest is more or less incidents which came out of my own life.

Q: And at the same time you have a number of other projects on the go, don't you? Can I ask you about *The Dreamers*, first of all? It was first performed as a one-act play in 1973. How is it different now?

DAVIS: It's now a two-act play, and also, that was an amateur performance. This is a professional performance: directed by a professional director, professional people in regards to lighting, etc.(2) And of course the scene in W.A. and Australia even seven to eight to nine years ago is different from what it is today, because the Aboriginal scene has changed fairly rapidly. So the things which were paramount seven to eight years ago no longer apply today. So I've re-written it and changed it to fit in with the scene of 1982. So the characters are the same, a lot of the dialogue is the same, but still there are a lot of changes.

Q: That play didn't have a terrific exposure anyway, so it is not as if a lot of people will be seeing it for a second time, I imagine. How would you characterize it: is it an optimistic or a pessimistic play?

DAVIS: Well, a mixture of both, I think. *The Dreamers* in 1973 was more or less political-it had political overtones, especially in terms of local government. But this one is more or less a psychological play which deals with partAboriginal people, Aboriginal people in an urban setting, but still it applies to any ethnic group throughout the world today. It could happen in Germany; it could happen in Canada; and it not

only applies to Aboriginal people or Indian people or Eskimo people; it happens to non-Aboriginal people also. We all suffer from the same thing.

Q: So it is not necessarily about a minority situation in a society?

DAVIS: It is-a minority situation in any city in the world or any town or any country in the world; it can happen and it does happen.

Q: So it is more an urban play whereas *Kullark* was more an historical, largely country-based play?

DAVIS: Yes, that's right. I thought, well I know that *Kullark* was very political; and it also dealt with the early history of Australia, especially West Australia, of course. But this one more or less... is a very cruel play, with a psychological twist which I think everybody can grasp, and everybody can suffer from: and that's the degree to which we sink because of our feelings. We can't rise above them-our frustrations which we face everyday-and the degree to which we can sink in terms of alcoholism and drugs and all that type of thing.

Q: So it comes to terms with a lot of current issues?

DAVIS: Everything. Every current issue which faces us.

Q: Is there any humour in it?

DAVIS: Yes, oh yes, verbal and situational.

Q: That seems to be a characteristic of your plays: that there is humour throughout.

DAVIS: Well, anything I write, and I find it especially so dealing with writing plays, you have to hold the whole gamut of people-that's the audience. Don't just show them the comic side of life right through; you show them sadness, pathos, gladness, happiness, sorrow, and all the in-between, that's all the way. And then the audience can grasp that straight away... all those emotions you know, that they go through-and the younger ones can see the humour and when they're a little bit older all of sudden they come along with a little bit of sadness. So, if you can pick up those emotions, and put them on paper and with good directorship in terms of lighting, etc., you can put up something which is really good for the audience.

Q: Is there violence actually portrayed on stage in *Kullark* or *The Dreamers*?

DAVIS: There was violence; there was-naturally. Of course there has to be violence in terms of Aboriginal existence. And so there was violence in *Kullark* and there is also violence in *The Dreamers*. And... *Kullark* was extremely successful, inasmuch as we had 97 performances, and they brought out *Death of a Salesman* in 1979 and they lost money on it.... But ours was a locally-produced play by a local director, by a local writer, local actors, and we broke even: 32 thousand dollars.

Q: And you toured?

DAVIS: We toured the south-west, yes, and the eastern goldfields.

Q: Speaking of *Kullark*, first of all, what was the major theme of that play?

DAVIS: It was history and neo-history. Before the coming of the white man, and after the coming of the white man. And it went in terms of a series of flash-backs and the scenes were interwoven: you saw the so-called Battle of Pinjarra, which was a massacre where they shot the official report was, fifteen Aborigines were shot, but the unofficial report was, 57 were buried in one great hole. And that was in a letter written by one of the settlers' wives to her relations in England in 1834. And then that story of what happened then is not finished; and the next scene, you're in a modern setting in 1979. So, the stories are like that-they interweave into one another like that.... In fact, using that was the only way I could get from 1829 to 1979-150 years -so we got the 150 years in the short space of an hour and a half, and the only way which we could do it was the clever way in which we used the scenery.

Q: Was it very strongly anti-government, do you think?

DAVIS: Not anti-present government, but colonial government; anti-colonial government. Well, it's still colonial bloody government I suppose, but in terms of it being a very sharp dig at the government from 1829 until 1946 anyway.

Q: Is there any talk of the Black nationalist movement in either of your plays?

DAVIS: Not in *Kullark*, but there's talk of Black Power in *The Dreamers*: 'There should be more smashin' and burnin' of these cars! We'll make these wadjellas sit up... They can't treat us Blackfellahs like that. We'll be like them fellas in America: we'll really get stuck into these bastards!' That's part of the scene-but we might cut it out.

Q: I wasn't really referring to violence, though. Put another way, have you ever tried to reach towards a kind of pan-aboriginal nationalism in your drama?

DAVIS: Oh, yes... I think pan-aboriginalism is very important. I think too that I see the West Australian situation as being the same as any other situation throughout Australia.... I think that mainly because of our isolationism over in W.A. that it seems to be just completely W.A. But the same thing has happened elsewhere, so there is a tie-up. You could show *The Dreamers* or you could show *Kullark* in any other state in Australia and, just by changing names where massacres took place, where missions were, where there was police brutality-all you have to do is change names and you're in the complete locale: it's the same thing exactly.

Q: Is the theme of *The Dreamers* more political or less political than that of *Kullark*? From what you've been saying, it sounds less political.

DAVIS: No, no. It's not so direct but it's more subtle. Inasmuch as I could afford to be more directly political in 1979, because it was the 150th year celebration But this one is more subtle and you'll see it's very cunning the way it's put.

Q: What kind of targets do you have? What is your aim in writing the play?

DAVIS: Well, it deals with the life of an urban Aboriginal family from sun-rise in the morning until sun-down at night. The whole event goes throughout the day. And, the longing for the things they can no longer get-the longing for the past is there all the time. The longing for the camp-fire; the longing for the safety of the Bush. Not having to face up to the white man's syndrome in terms of rent, electric light, a leaking roof, a stove which refuses to work, and that type of thing-which Aborigines never had to suffer in those far by-gone days when Aborigines lived in the Bush, and they were isolated but they were happy. The differences are there, which they complain about: 'Oh God, I wish I was back in the Bush!'

Q: So, it's an anti-urban play-desiring a return to more basic things?

DAVIS: Well, desiring a return, but knowing it's not there any more. The longing is there but even if they thought they *could* go there they wouldn't, because the television set's here and, you know, there are too many good things in life now. But the longing is there in the back of their minds.

Q: So what's the solution, or the resolution of that problem?

DAVIS: Jamie has the answer. Jamie is the 1982 urban Aboriginal. He's got a good job, he's a smart-looking guy, he's got a nice suit and everything and he's got a job as a carpenter. He comes down to visit the relations and, because he's a young smart-aleck, he's telling them what to do-what they shouldn't do-and he's the modern Aboriginal. And, he's a very important part of the play.

Q: Would you see that as a general solution to Aboriginal dilemmas, though? Is this not assimilation?

DAVIS: There will always be differences. I don't care where it is: there will always be differences between black and white... there is that difference and that's it. A lot of my family is white, you know; I've got white grandchildren with blue eyes and fair skin and they call themselves 'Nyoongar', which means 'black'. They don't even regard themselves as being white. And they talk with an Aboriginal *patois*; they've got Aboriginal behavioural patterns and Aboriginal speech patterns.

Q: This distinctive Aboriginal world view: is it reflected in Aboriginal drama?

DAVIS: Oh, yes. You see, we've always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world... we've acted up before magistrates, we've acted up before the police, we've acted up before social workers; we've always done our own mime. It's not too long since we were introduced to television and all that type of thing, and when we lived in the Bush we had our own way of doing these things ourselves, so that's why it's not so difficult for me to find an Aboriginal theme.... Like the man who burns his feet and he doesn't even know his feet are alight. He's standing on the fire and he says, [imitating voice] 'By Crikey, I can smell somethin' burnin' there! You fellas burn an old bag over there somewhere? Or you burnin' kangaroo skin?' [New voice] 'Uncle! You're standing in the fire! Get out of the fire there!' He never wore boots for forty years and he's got callouses on his feet that thick, and he was standing in the fire. His feet were burning and he didn't even know it! And laughed-you know that, [claps] that went around the camp for a week. Well, little incidents like that, you know, that carry on all the time-it's not very hard to put 'em down on paper. I'm sure the Aboriginal playwrights have seen that.

Q: So, then, is drama your favourite *genre* of writing?

DAVIS: Look, frankly, it's the hardest job I've ever had in my life. Being a playwright is terrifically-it just pulls the gut out of you. You can write a poem and it may be a lonely occupation, but at least it's your thing. You can write a short story-it's your thing; you can write a novel-it's your thing; but once you sit down to write a play, it's everybody's fucking business. It's the actors, it's the bloody stage money, it's the director: the whole lot. You've got the whole lot to contend with... and you've got to sit here and review them. If somebody miscues or says the wrong thing, you sit there and shudder in your seat-you just simply shudder. So I would say writing plays is the hardest job I've ever had in my life, and I'm pretty sure I'll write this one and another one-I'll write three-and then I'll give it away.

Q: Well, what *advantages* does drama have then? Do plays have a greater impact than other forms of writing? Are they a better vehicle for humour or for political ideas?

DAVIS: I don't know whether drama is a *better* form. O.K., your audience that sees the play-if it's a good play-might have been a thousand. But, if you're writing a short story, it might be read by twenty thousand-perhaps the writing medium is better than the acting one.

Q: I guess what you're talking about is exposure, really. It's great to have Aboriginal writers get published, but if they're only published by very marginal publishing houses, or if the distribution isn't very good, then the impact is really lost on a lot of people. Is there anything that can be done to improve that side: the actual distribution and marketing side of the system?

DAVIS: Well, you know here's the medium of film-video-video, in terms of plays, because that's the next step. I would much prefer to have seen *Kullark* produced as a film and, in fact, two film companies have got hold of it at the present moment and they've cut it in half. The finance for one is coming from Germany and the other is a film treatment in Australia, and they're going to flog the strip to some suitable director.

Q: So, will this be produced on location?

DAVIS: Yes, it will be produced right on the spot where the actual happening was-the Battle of Pinjarra and all that type of thing. They got the idea twelve months ago but it's a matter of money.

Q: Are you hoping that perhaps television might be an area that you'll get into at some point?

DAVIS: At some point, but I would much prefer to see *Kullark* - initially - go on film. That's 35 millimetre.... It will come. Oh, it will come-although it may take another three or four years.

Q: Speaking of the future, are there any up-and-coming Aboriginal authors, whose work you are particularly impressed with?

DAVIS: Oh, Archie Weller. Oh yes, for sure, the brightest writer in Australia, white or black.

Q: Has he been writing anything else besides the novel, *The Day of the Dog*?(3)

DAVIS: He had a go at poetry. And, I had a look at them and I told him to forget it: 'You'll never make a poet'; which he did do. He's started on a play, which he was two-thirds through, and I don't know what he's done with it. Right now, I believe he's up in northern W.A. researching his next novel.

Q: Are there any other young Aboriginal writers whose talent you admire?

DAVIS: Well, the younger writers certainly will improve. They're coming up with some good stuff. You've got to remember, too, that Aboriginal writers are not like non-Aboriginal writers, inasmuch as they've got the political scene to contend with. And, they've got their own thoughts to put down on paper, regardless of what's political, in terms of writing something which they want to sell. So, it's sort of like splitting their mind. You know, if you haven't got any political hang-ups, I should imagine you can sit down and go ahead and write with your mind fairly free. But, most Aboriginal writers were involved within the Black movement.

Q: Did they start out as political people or did they start out as writers?

DAVIS: We all started off as political people.

Q: So that's a stage you've gone through...

DAVIS: That's right.

Q: Do you feel that the writing is hampered by being too political?

DAVIS: Oh no, I don't think so. As I said, the political scene has changed and now it's more right for us to write what we think about ourselves. Like I said, I was writing this book about a boy from when he was a five year-old until he was ten years of age. There's nothing political in that whatsoever; it's just a funny book about a little kid who goes to school.

Q: So then, how significant is activism and demonstrating for Aboriginal people now?

DAVIS: They've had their usefulness, but that's gone now... you could put up a tent today and people would laugh at it... now it's time for the people with the pen to take over. I always believe that the old axiom, 'the pen is mightier than the sword' is really true. And, I always like to modernize that phrase by saying, 'the biro is far, far better than the gun'!

Q: So just how significant are the Aboriginal writers in English?

DAVIS: I think they're the most important thing we've got... and I think we are extremely lucky because we belong here, and are not a transplanted Black people like they are in the [United] States. We belong here, and we've got a vital say in it. And, people are going to turn over one morning and say, 'Christ! Look what I've got in my library!'. You know, I really think so.... I talk in terms of decades-ten years-everything I think of in terms of ten years. And I see the changes in my lifetime. And I'm going to see it in the next ten years- and I think I'll live to see that-the people are going to have, not half a dozen; they're going to have thirty or forty books on their shelves which are going to be written by Aboriginal writers. And I think they'll cover the whole field.

Q: That's an optimistic view.

DAVIS: I'm not even optimistic; I'm quite sure it's going to happen.

This interview was conducted in Canberra on 13 November 1981.

Notes

1. Jack Davis, *The First-Born, and other Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1970; *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia*, Methuen, Sydney, 1978.
2. See review of Jack Davis's *The Dreamers* by Bill Dunstone in *Westerly* No. 2, June 1982, pp. 63-66.

3. Archie Weller, *The Day of the Dog*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981. This novel won the W.A. Literary Award 1982.

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