

The Inspiration Behind *The White Divers of Broome*

As we look forward to *The White Divers of Broome*, Black Swan's first play in 2012 at the State Theatre Centre of WA, we look back at the inspiration that brought this story to our stage. In 2001 author John Bailey published his book *The White Divers of Broome* about the cultural and racial clashes involved in the pearling boom in pre-WWI Broome. Interested in the story, playwright Hilary Bell approached Black Swan and through the Rio Tinto Black Swan Commissions, she was commissioned to write this play. *On Cue* spoke to Hilary Bell and John Bailey about their inspirations.

A Perth International Arts Festival event, *The White Divers of Broome* will play in the Heath Ledger Theatre from 28 January to 16 February. General tickets are on sale now through BOCS Ticketing.

JOHN BAILEY



On Cue: You've lived all over the world and had several different vocations. How do you think that has affected your writing and your sources of inspiration?

John Bailey: I go to where the stories are, and if they be located far from where I live – well I have to go there. This has its up and down sides. On the plus side I get a chance to travel, but it means writing about a setting new to me and in order to make the setting real I have to learn about its culture, plants, animals, peoples, etc. This requires a great deal of research and reading, particularly if, as in the case of *The White Divers of Broome*, I am writing about events which happened a hundred years ago. As was famously said by L.P. Hartley, 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'

As to your question as to how my varied career (a school teacher in New Guinea and London, a public servant in Sydney and Canberra, a barrister in Melbourne and a researcher in America) has affected my writing - it is hard to say. I'm sure it has, but in that bubbling bag of misfiring electro-chemicals which is John Bailey's brain, I never know what is causing what.

OC: All your books, excepting *The Moon Baby*, are largely historical stories. Are you drawn to history for a particular reason? Do you find historical stories easier/harder/more interesting to write?

JB: Here is a confession: I would like to succeed as a writer of fiction. I have tried it several times, but become uncertain and confused when making plot decisions, or creating (and discarding) characters. I guess I get frightened by the empty canvas of fiction. Ain't it easier with non-fiction! Mother history has set out the plot and the characters for you. All you have to do is pick and choose, but you are not allowed to change history. Perhaps I work better in a straightjacket!

OC: What drove you to write *The White Divers of Broome*? What inspired that story idea?

JB: I was sent to Broome for court hearing. The case finished early so having a few days spare I walked around the town, visiting the museum, the waterfront and the cemetery. I was blown away by the rich history, the romance of pearling and the multicultural influence of the place. I have always been interested in local history and before I caught my flight back South I purchase some books and guides to the town. There I read a few paragraphs on the so-called 'White Experiment.' I immediately thought 'this is a story that has to be told.' It had drama, awful racism and a beautiful

and exotic location. Back in Melbourne I began to do some more research, including reading the report of the 1913 Royal Commission into the pearling industry. I have always wanted to be a full-time writer and I realised that if I didn't seize this opportunity I would probably never do it. I resigned as a barrister, and within days I had an outline of the story that would take me another two years to write.

OC: Some of your books have been optioned for movies, but this is the first play inspired by one of your books. As a novelist, how do you feel about *The White Divers of Broome* inspiring Hilary Bell to write a play?

JB: I know Hilary Bell well and have seen several of her plays on stage, so I have no doubt it will be a success. I am not proprietorial about my book. How could I? After all, it is the common property of the people of Western Australia. I know nothing about writing plays or stagecraft. These are skills that take particular talents and experience. The staging of the play is the responsibility of Black Swan, Hilary and the production team, so I can relax and enjoy, just like the rest of the audience.

OC: Are you currently working on another book?

JB: Yes, but it is another attempt at a work of fiction. I shall probably never finish it, so I won't tell you what it is about.

OC: Are there any historical events in WA that you are thinking of writing about, or that you think would make a good book?

JB: Western Australia is a minefield of good, open-spaced stories. Did I just say minefield? Now there is an idea. How about a rip-roaring true-life yarn about the first geologists finding the under the ground fortunes which are now driving both the State and the Australian economy?

OC: Do you normally interact with your readers? How so, and how often?

JB: I live in a small town around the bay from Byron Bay in NSW. I give talks based on my books to local schools, seniors' groups and at the town library. As to wider audience, I usually accept invitations to writers' festivals and I have a website (www.jbailey.info) which allows people to write comments about my books. I try to answer every email I receive. Apart from that I'm a bit of a hermit.

John's book *The White Divers of Broome* can be purchased through the Dymocks website.

HILARY BELL



On Cue: What about the book *The White Divers of Broome* grabbed you? What made you think it would make a good story for the stage?

Hilary Bell: Apart from the exoticness of Broome at the turn of the century, the thing that most intrigued me was the slipperiness of the story's morality. When I first started reading the book, and learnt that Broome's white pearling masters were the last hold-outs against a government insisting on a white Australia, I cheered them for their courage. But a chapter later, it transpired that they acted not from broadmindedness but because white labour, in an industry as theirs, would cut into profits: 'coloureds' accepted conditions, rations and pay that no white man would tolerate. Feeling I'd now identified the true victims, I read further only to discover the ruthlessness of many of these 'coloureds', especially the Japanese, and the fact that if only they could exploit people as the whites did, they would do so without hesitation. So then was it the English divers who

were the innocents? Not entirely: as with all the masters and workers, of every nationality, they were individuals with their own prejudices, allegiances, aspirations, dreads... in short: human beings. So I was captivated by the way the story kept flipping over itself in this respect, never allowing us to cast judgment but reminding us of the highly complex nature of humanity.

As to putting this story on stage: it presented visual possibilities, along with music, movement, and of course drama, that I couldn't resist exploring. The first image I had was of a diver in full dress, including helmet, walking in slow motion on the seabed, singing opera. That image never made it into the play, but it's hovered like a benign spirit over the writing process, infusing it with a sense of the beautiful, the lonely, and the extraordinary.

OC: How was it writing a play inspired by a book? Was it harder than writing a play organically, or easier? More enjoyable?

HB: It was inspired by a historical event, rather than the book per se, which is a non-fiction account of this event. Though John Bailey's wonderful writing drew me in, and thanks to the book I found out about the 'White Experiment', as it was called.

In some ways writing from fact was easier, because the narrative arc was already there. But even so, as a playwright you have to decide what it is you want to say, or explore, about an event, and this is how you decide how to structure the play, what scenes to depict, and indeed what characters people it. The true story involved eleven British ex-Navy divers; my play has three. There were many pearling masters crucial to the actual event; I've conflated them into one man. The book describes the effect of pearling on the Indigenous people, but as far as the White Experiment went, none played a particular role – I felt that you couldn't put this story onstage without an Indigenous presence, and that that person mustn't be a token observer, but needed to be someone with their own stakes in the outcome, their own journey.

Similarly with the Japanese: they were an essential part of the story, but the book featured no particular character, so I invented Nishi and Yukiko.

Also, the book covers such a vast expanse of time (40,000 years ago to the present!), and refers to politics local, national and global, and to all the other conditions impacting Broome, so I had to keep winnowing the story down to its essential drama. This crunching of time, space and characters was the most work-intensive part of the process.

OC: You've written for stage, radio, screen and music theatre, among others. Do you have a favourite writing medium? How are the mediums different for you, in terms of inspiration or method?

HB: Stage is my favourite medium of all, whether that be straight drama or music theatre. (Most of my 'straight' plays involve song of some kind, in fact.) Radio runs a close second. Screenwriting is wonderful in the different sorts of challenges it sets, its demands and possibilities, but I don't feel at home there the way I do with theatre. The methods for all are certainly very different, and the idea dictates to you what dramatic form it needs to take. It's a chicken-and-egg thing: sometimes you have an idea that, because of its inherent qualities, can only be radio play; sometimes you're approached by, say, a youth theatre company to come up with a play for forty teenagers to perform, so the demand inspires the supply.

OC: What other projects are you currently working on, just finishing or dreaming up?

HB: The Sydney Theatre Company commissioned *The Splinter*, on which I've been collaborating with a puppeteer. We've just finished our second workshop and open next August.

In progress is a musical called *Do Good And You Will Be Happy*, about Cole's Funny Picture Book, a Victorian publication for children, put together by extraordinary Melbournian E.W. Cole. Composer Phillip Johnston and myself are about to present a showing through New Musicals Australia.

And currently I'm on my way to London for a workshop at the National Theatre: they've commissioned a play for their Connections 2012 programme.