Chapter 5

Getting to Know the Story of the Boathouse Dances: Football, Freedom and Rock 'n' Roll

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There was a worldwide revolution and the revolution was called rock 'n' roll.
(Uncle Charlie King, 4 March 2012 interview)

Introduction

In 2011, the Indigenous[1] Research Network (IRN) at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia brought together a team of playwrights and researchers to tell the story of the Boathouse dances as its first community-driven research project. The Boathouse dances were held in the late 1950s and early 1960s and were a significant meeting place for Aboriginal people of Brisbane and the greater South East Queensland region. The dances were organized by an Aboriginal man, Uncle Charlie King, to fund the first Aboriginal football team in Brisbane and an Aboriginal women's virago team.[2] The Boathouse dances were a time of celebration, reconnecting, establishing new relationships and falling in love. The dances were also a focal point of significant social change in the lives of many Aboriginal people and were driven by Aboriginal people who were experiencing a new agency. To date, this story is untold; it is a part of Australia's hidden histories.

The chapter focuses on the processes and subsequent tensions of researching and retelling the story of the Boathouse dances. To understand these tensions, we firstly need to take the reader on a journey to understand what is meant by hidden histories within the Australian context. This involves a brief history of colonial Australia leading into the social and political backdrop of the 1950s and 1960s. From this backdrop, we explore the cultural and social significance of Boathouse dances, the significance of the location of the Boathouse, the ritual of preparing and traveling to the dances, and the story of Uncle Charlie King who made the event possible. We also explore the evolution of researching and retelling the Boathouse story so that it is an authentic representation for our Elders and also honours the transformative nature of the dances to create a better future for Aboriginal people in the greater Brisbane region.

At this point, it is helpful to understand the notion of regionalism within the context of this story. Regionalism can be defined as the area outside of a city's urbanized centre. Given the colonization process described below, urban and city centres became the realm of white society, while many Aboriginal people were pushed into fringe areas like Cherbourg, Stradbroke Island and Beaudesert. In other words, many Aboriginal people were regionalized and only entered the urban centres for work within service roles such as factory workers and housekeepers. The very concept of regionalism in relation to Aboriginal identity is

Georgiou, daughter of Boathouse founder and organizer Uncle Charlie King. Sandra, a prominent figure in Brisbane's Aboriginal community, was passionate about getting the story greater exposure and documenting it for future generations. As Lyndon and Sandra were working on a project for which they met on a regular basis, week by week the conversation and idea developed until Lyndon brought it to the attention of other Aboriginal academics at Griffith University.

The Boathouse project had many facets: a community oral history project, a possible exhibition and also an interest in developing a documentary theatre performance based around the story of Uncle Charlie King and his dealings with the running of the Boathouse. The project gathered momentum and in 2010 a community meeting was called at the State Library. A number of Elders attended the meeting and their stories were recorded. There was a sense of urgency and necessity in undertaking the interviews sooner rather than later. During the life of the project, a number of Elders who had been involved in the Boathouse and the All Blacks football team passed away due to age or ill health. It seemed that the logical next step was to continue collecting the oral histories and develop a project around what was being recorded.

Getting to know the story of the Boathouse has been an ongoing experience. From the outset, there was an understanding of what it meant to live under the Protection Act and hence the significance of an Aboriginal man staging a dance for Aboriginal people under these laws; however, we did not know how significant the Boathouse dances were or that they had been a strong positive influence for many Aboriginal people in Brisbane. The significance and experience of the Boathouse dances for our Elders is multi-faceted and includes the importance of place, the preparation before the dance, the gathering itself, how the dance was structured and the importance of rock 'n' roll culture. The Boathouse dances offered a space for gathering and cultural renewal.

The oral histories led to the development of a community documentary script, written by Tamara Whyte and Tamika Currie. The narratives contained in the script are based on the shared histories of Elders from Brisbane and their recollections of the people, events, music and social gathering of the 1960s from an Aboriginal perspective. In so doing, the practices bind regional and urban contexts in a fluid and discursively formed mnemonic space. The creative development process involved walking an ethical tightrope between being truthful to the verbatim material, representing individual as well as community perspectives, and constructing a compelling theatrical story that captured the essence of the times. Unlike other theatrical representations of Aboriginal dances, for example Wesley Enoch's (2000) *The Sunshine Club*, the play emerged from community voices and the strong desire for community representation and the sharing of these stories. This added a level of complexity and placed pressure on the writers to not only value and respect collective memories, but also to negotiate different voices within the community of Elders. The team around the Boathouse believed that as a story, and as a historical experience, the Boathouse has implications and lessons for all. The struggle has been, and still is, to find a way to take as many people as possible on that journey, and to make that journey represent the experiences

of the dance attendees while also sufficiently informing the audience, be they local, domestic or international.

Understanding the Story

The Boathouse dances were a focal point of change, where many circumstances and ideas converged to create a unique event. This section explores various elements of the Boathouse dances to draw out the significance of the changing times and how Aboriginal people became active agents to facilitate this change. The main aspects of the Boathouse dances that are explored are the significance of where the Boathouse was situated, the ritual behind preparing and traveling to the Boathouse and the gathering itself.

Significance of Place

The Boathouse dances were held at the O'Connor Boathouse, which was situated on the northern side of the Brisbane River near the centre of Brisbane. As the name suggests, the Boathouse was an actual house that stored boats for the local rowing club. The Boathouse had two levels: the bottom level stored the boats and equipment, while the top level was a large hall surrounded by a veranda (see Figure 3). The Brisbane River and roads, aptly named Boundary Street, marked out the boundaries for the imposed curfew on Aboriginal people. During the curfew, Aboriginal people were not allowed on the north side of the river without specific permission. Hence, by the 1950s, the north side of the river was generally considered among Aboriginal people as the domain of white society.

One of the Elders, Aunty Faye Gundy, recalled walking across the Victoria Bridge towards the north side of the river and being stopped by a suspected Native Affairs 'spy':

> he actually came to me with his little scooter, in front of me, tried to stop me from going across the bridge. I said get out of my road or I knock you off. So he got out of the road and he wouldn't stop me. I knew that he was the spy cause that's when I went back to Native Affairs on Thursday (they said) [...] 'You were seen going across that bridge'.
>
> (Aunty Faye Gundy, interview)

The experiences of Aunty Faye Gundy demonstrate that at this time the Native Affairs Department was still trying to enforce the ideas behind the curfew, but that a change of agency now meant that Aunty Faye Gundy was brave enough to assert her rights and continue to cross the bridge. As the Boathouse occupied the side of the river from which Aboriginal people were still excluded, to be able to access the O'Connor Boathouse and hold dances there was a significant achievement for Aboriginal people at that time. Organizing the dances within the boundaries of the city precinct saw Aboriginal people placing

themselves within the domain of white society: their social dance was on par with any of the others held around town. In addition, the river and the ability to access it were definite highlights in some attendees' memories. At different times during the dance, couples would move to the veranda for the cool air and a view that overlooked the south side of the river.

The Preparation

> For most Aborigines it was still a life of controlled subjugation, dominated by extreme poverty, lack of basic services, poor housing, ill health and relentless surveillance, control and intervention by state and church authorities. Infant mortality remained high, life expectancy low, and only a few managed to beat the odds and obtain a decent education.
>
> (Fryer Library, University of Queensland 2013)

The Boathouse dances provided the men and women who attended the chance to dress up and dance. For some, it was their only chance to socialize away from their domestic duties and get together with family, countrymen and other Aboriginal people. In contrast to the prevailing attitudes and experiences of the time, the Boathouse dances were gatherings where people felt free to enjoy themselves and express their individual personalities. Not all attendees had the same access to the fashionable clothing of the time. As our interviews with the Elders revealed, there was a difference between the women employed as domestics under the Act and women who were employed at the Mater Hospital, with the latter having access to a wider variety of dresses, materials and accessories. Aunty Elva Dickfoss (interview) recalls:

> We made our own dresses, we couldn't buy them, you know, with working and things like that. And especially by this time I was the one that, I was the one that wasn't working at the time. So I had to watch my pennies.

Aunty Honour Cleary (interview) explains life for her under the Act:

> See, when we were let out to go out, we would ask if we could go to the dance. See we were paid five pounds a week and three pounds went to the department and we only got two pounds. We had to buy our clothes if we wanted to go out, our toiletries and everything with that money.

Dressing up and attending the dances for many interviewees was a point of pride and fond memories. Attendees fondly recall the beauty of the women in their dresses and the men dressed in snappy suits. One of the male attendees, Maxie Currie, is distinctly remembered for his lime green suit and hat, an outfit that left a visual impact; while another, Earl Drake, the Master of Ceremonies, was noted for always carrying a handkerchief: '[He was] very

particular, and he was dressed in a suit, a white shirt and all that hanky. The lady put her hand on the hanky, not his sweaty hand' (Uncle Charlie King, interview). The Boathouse saw a mix in ages of Aboriginal society. Many of the attendees were in their early to late teens, with some still under twelve when they attended with their parents. Some of the women interviewed fondly recalled the glamour of the evening:

> All I know it was a beautiful thing to see. There's one Murri women especially, she was up there dancing, and she was the centre of attention. When she got on the floor people just stopped and looked at her. She was, you know a really neat dancer, real deadly.
>
> (Aunty Lyn Johannsen, interview)

To get to the dances, people would walk or catch the bus, train or boat to get to the venue. There was a strict curfew and the evenings always ended promptly to ensure everyone got home:

> People used to rally to the dances. It's the same when the Boathouse arrived. I could name you a few people they would come to the dance of a Saturday night and drive all the way back up to Beaudesert. A lot of people from Ipswich would after the dance walk up to Roma Street and catch the last train home to Ipswich.
>
> (Uncle Stanley Smith, interview)

The Gathering

In hindsight, the Boathouse dances can be seen as contemporary gatherings of Aboriginal people within the region. With many of the social structures of Aboriginal people disrupted by the British colonization and subsequent government intervention, the emergence of this social gathering served to unite and strengthen families and communities in South East Queensland; that is, the Straddie mob, the Cherbourg mob and the Beaudesert mob (the areas in which large numbers of Aboriginal people lived and which they identified as their home).

The evenings themselves were multi-generational, with the Elders of the time attending the dances, and children brought by their parents watching the dancing. The music was a combination of a three-piece band that played older time music for the older generation to dance to and a record player connected to a sound system to play the new rock 'n' roll music. In between the sets of the band, the record player would play rock 'n' roll. At first, songs that had a slow tempo would be played, with the tempo increasing throughout the night to build up the excitement of the dance until it was time to leave. The tempo would then be slowed down again, to prepare everyone to catch the last tram, bus or train home. There were some strict social codes in place for the evening. For example, no woman should be left seated during a dance and there were to be no broken glasses or drinking. The dances also provided the ideal opportunity to fraternize with the opposite sex:

> Yes, well that was where you went to meet […] I wasn't, cause I was very young, and shy […] and just used to watch the boys and the girls getting together. Where I was more or less, head down, dance with my sister and that was it. But I did see that was where you went to meet.
>
> (Aunty Marlene Kerr, interview)

Like most youth of the time, Aboriginal people embraced the rock 'n' roll culture. Some remember the influence that the presence of the American soldiers had on Brisbane, while others embraced the dress and dance that was changing the cultural landscape. One of the attendees fondly remembers doing The Stomp:

> Oh god, help em. Flay your hands around, stomp, your boobs went up and down. You wanted to make sure you had taut tits, they were banging, they go […] they were stomping too […] then they'd stomp around, go around in little circle.
>
> (Aunty Serena, interview)

Uncle Charlie King v. the System

The actual process of obtaining access to the Boathouse required deft and intelligent political manoeuvring on behalf of Uncle Charlie King. Large or even minimal social gatherings of Aboriginal people were disapproved of at the time, especially when they were organized and run by Aboriginal people. To establish the All Blacks football club, Uncle Charlie King had to meet with Ron MacAuliffe, Secretary (1953–1959), jointly, of the Queensland and Brisbane Rugby Leagues, to gain approval to enter the league. MacAuliffe's stance was not encouraging and he directed Uncle Charlie King to form a team under a different name. However, Uncle Charlie King was resolute; he wanted a team named the Brisbane All Blacks. Uncle Charlie King defined very clearly the importance of the team identifying themselves in this way:

> Don't be ashamed. Because […] of the Native Affairs, we were classified as natives. It came under natives; I said no. We're not ashamed to call ourselves Blacks we'll stay with the name, Brisbane All Blacks. Brisbane All Blacks, ay. We're not ashamed if they called us 'abo', because 'abo' is Aboriginal. We are the originals! Let them call us that, we will love it! We love it because when I say 'abo' I say, you, we are the originals. We are the original one […] First here, where'd you come from, ay? Boat people, you the original boat people, you're still coming out in boats. Huh, yeah! They come from other countries.
>
> (Uncle Charlie King, interview)

In response to resistance from the Brisbane Rugby League, Uncle Charlie King and other Committee members George Lee, Les Ray and Jimmy Hamilton approached the Murrumba League citing better access for players (the majority lived on the north side of Brisbane) and

personal freedom throughout the city and South East Queensland. In part, this may have been due to the broader social constraints around what was expected of women, and particularly so from an Aboriginal viewpoint. However, a number of the men interviewed moved more freely 'under' or 'around' the Act due to having greater choice in employment compared to women (for example, they could work in abattoirs, droving, market gardens). This gave them more financial freedom, which seemed to lead to increased freedom of movement, association and independence. In contrast, many of the women were still employed as domestics, either under the Act or through the churches, or in unpaid employment as housewives and mothers. Boxing and football also featured heavily in the men's stories. Although many of the women played vigaro, the boxing and opportunity it afforded men in terms of socialization and a potential source of income and travel again fed into how their Boathouse experience was shaped.

The Reading: Are the Writers Getting It Right in the Eyes of the Community?

The writing process began by creating a few short scenes (in the initial draft for public reading). I (Tamara) looked at the men and their recollections of boxing, drinking, the iconic fig tree in front of the Boathouse and how these experiences fed into the overall Boathouse experience. Tamika focused on the women's stories – the preparation for the dances, the courting and the fun of the dances – and the notion of one man's (Uncle Charlie King) connection to the Boathouse.

There was a mixed reaction when the script was presented to the attendees and community at the reading in 2011. We invited all the Elders and the families to the reading, which was presented as a celebration of the oral histories. We also ensured that it was an opportunity for community feedback and consultation. There was a great deal of reminiscing and questioning of the script. For example, in one scene, the story of a fight that had occurred underneath the fig tree was re-told. Some people had no recollection of the events (fighting and drinking) and to a degree the reading challenged the validity of their recollections. Others preferred to see references to drinking removed, as they felt it was a negative representation and a commonplace stereotype.

The initial showing highlighted the tensions that exist when working in this setting. As writers, we feel an obligation to represent the communities' experiences and ensure that they are at ease with the manner in which we do that. However, at the same time, we are looking for the interesting, untold, engaging or illuminating stories within the larger narrative. The honesty with which the men related their experiences had provided us as playwrights with exactly those story qualities. Like many other scenes in the play, the fight scene set under the branches of a fig tree, helped to re-contextualize and redefine Aboriginal men. We kept the humour of the situation and the genuine camaraderie of the fighters, which was very apparent in the oral history interviews. The desire to present a multi-faceted representation of Aboriginal life and contribution in the 1950s and 1960s marks one of the strengths of this story.

As playwrights and members of the project team, we had a fair idea of how we wanted the process of scripting the Boathouse to flow. For us, the community play reading was just an initial step in a longer process; however, for some community members, this was not the case. There had been a swell of interest once the oral history interviews began and community members had hoped for more progress. It became obvious that we had to continue to work at bringing the community along with the process. Some Elders at the reading asked aloud 'Where was the dancing?' or commented: 'Perhaps you could have some music'. 'It's a good start but you need more'. All of these were valid observations and allowed us to some degree to relate the process of bringing this story to life.

Heading Towards a Full Play

In September 2012, the project team engaged the services of two dramaturgs to help to sculpt the meta-narrative of the Boathouse. Being so close to the oral histories, celebrating the discovery of interesting anecdotes and having slowly constructed the socio-political context over the months of research meant that I (Tamara) no longer had the space to see the strongest story arc for the work. Co-writing also meant that there were two minds and voices and therefore a multitude of experiences and preferences for different aspects of the Boathouse story. This is a strength, but both writers identified a tension early in the process in how to balance these qualities and harness our passion for a community-driven story that showcased a unique experience to create a successful first draft. The dramaturgical support was essential and in some ways acted as the silent umpire in a writers' tussle.

It was also imperative for us to hand over the subject matter to people who came from an outsiders' perspective and who therefore brought another opinion on the strengths of the story, which characters were needed to tell the story and which of the stories needed to be told. It was during this period that I saw the play shift away from a pure verbatim approach to one that incorporated interpretation and aesthetic writing that captured the essence and feeling of the times.

On top of this, creating a dynamic working relationship within the Aboriginal community presented different challenges for each of us. Tamika Currie had local connections and even family members who had attended the Boathouse. Therefore, she had an implicit understanding that she was accountable for the work being produced, and that there was an expectation on her as a daughter, niece and teacher, in addition to that as one of the writers. I am a little further removed from that close circle of responsibility; but, having developed strong ties with some of the key proponents of the Boathouse story, I nonetheless felt a desire and obligation to see those experiences truthfully represented on the page. In this way, Tamika and I represented two sides of the same coin, bearing different community responsibilities.

I have struggled continuously through the drafting process with the dilemma of being intimately aware of some of the most engaging and surprising incidents within the many

stories that make up the narrative of the Boathouse. Yet, I am also acutely aware that the friendships and rapport that we have built to gain access to these stories often serve as a barrier to writing. I struggle with the desire to bring these stories to the page and then imaginatively to the stage, while being aware that these stories have caused pain and hurt to people who are still with us today. At the same time, the raw and the painful are engaging, as each strikes a chord within us all.

Questions of Ownership

As the project was initially brought to Lyndon Murphy's attention, it found itself a home through the IRN at Griffith University. Different members of the team working on the project have raised questions regarding community ownership of the story and subsequent public performances. As we move through the process of unravelling and immersing ourselves in the story of the Boathouse dances, it has become apparent that one way to tell the story is through Uncle Charlie King's actions and visions. Yet the actual dances are the memories and creation of a broad and diverse group of Aboriginal people. As we move forward towards scripting the work, we are continually wondering whose work this is, and how we can appropriately recognize their varying contributions.

At this stage, as writers, we feel that remuneration for the writing process and the experience to work on a community-based production is fair payment. We have received professional development through participating in the process and working with a range of colleagues, and for a community-based project perhaps this is enough. Holcombe (2010: 23) writes about the process from research to knowledge formation:

> [knowledge] gains a different value as it enters a less negotiated space. The 'expertise' of the researcher as knowledge transcriber is transformative: knowledge becomes arranged into factual data, losing it contingent and partial nature. It gains a different potency that tends to favour the transcriber. This process is especially apparent within the accepted academic process of mobilising knowledge through publication.

These observations have ongoing points of conflict within the development of a script to a stage production and beyond. Considering the roles involved – for instance, writer, dramaturg, director, producer and publisher – how can the project ensure that the original intention of the IRN is carried through into the future? If we are looking at different ways that Aboriginal academics and researchers interact with their own communities, can we confidently say we have the capacity to work in a different way? The university system of research can seem like a glacial monument, slow to change and yet ultimately achieving its intended outcomes; like a glacier, there will be damage in its path. Can academia truly work with Aboriginal communities on an equal footing, or better yet on a footing that offers Aboriginal people and communities a definitive say?

Working with these factors in mind and trying to sit down and write the script was a difficult process. The script development workshop allowed us the chance to look at the macro structure of the story of the Boathouse, including the organization of the dances, the football, the relationships and the night itself. The difficulty came when trying to select elements of the story and create a narrative that represented the greater whole. As writers, we felt that each of the oral history interviewees needed to see their story reflected on the stage, whether it be through the retelling of a story, a line of dialogue or an element of a character. Thus, it was essential that we weaved a narrative that told an engaging story while also retelling everyone's experience of the Boathouse.

As the project has evolved, it is possible to draw correlations between what we are doing and notions of corroboree for Aboriginal peoples. (A corroboree is an event at which Aborigines interact with the Dreamtime through dance, music and costume.) Social memory and the lessons and knowledge to be learnt from the collective experience have been passed down through generations, stories are added, some are no longer shared and new occurrences are integrated into the cycle. Oral tradition has played a key role in Aboriginal history in documenting and passing on stories. The compilation of the Boathouse story continues that oral tradition and takes it a step further by writing it down for future performances. In this way, it is transformed from social memory within the Aboriginal community to a public sharing for the broader community. In script form, we are attempting to incorporate many stories and multiple memories of history into an overall representation of one night at the Boathouse. Like a corroboree through story, dance and music, we are establishing the history, exploring the knowledge, representing the spectacular and sharing the teaching.

Conclusion

The Boathouse story represents a compelling celebration of community resistance and resilience. Caught up in the changing social contexts of the 1950s and 1960s, the Elders at the heart of the story made something extraordinary happen. As with other acts of civil rights resistance, the Boathouse Elders refused history by negotiating new terms. The Boathouse story represents a significant regional and national turning point, celebrating the determination and refusal to submit to the imposition of old codes and regulations. Documenting the story and the memories of Elders has been a privilege. Representing the story through performance is a long-term work in progress involving ethical issues, the need for continuing community consultation, aesthetic deliberations and a race against time to ensure that the Elders and the wider community see the story shared, celebrated and recognized.

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Notes

1 The term 'Aboriginal' will be used to refer to the many cultures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

2 Vigaro is a women's team sport that was predominantly popular in Australia and has been described as a cross between cricket and baseball.