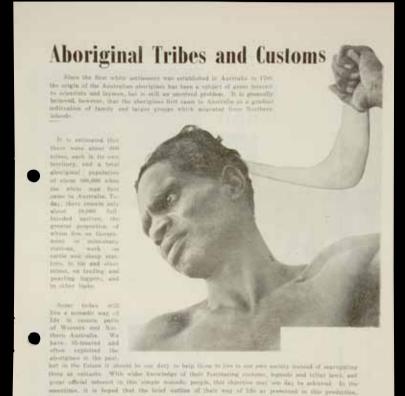






INDIGENOUS ENTERTAINERS AND ENTREPRENEURS IN ENTREPRENEURS IN Lynainta Fragen & Destinu Dencon Curated by Virginia Fraser & Destiny Deacon

AT THE CITY GALLERY, MELBOURNE TOWN HALL SWANSTON SREET







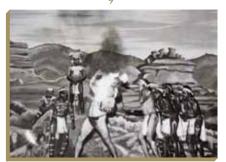


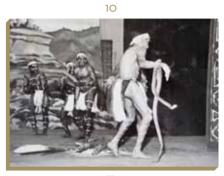




- 1 Glamour from the second half of the in white), JoanSaunders (further right). Mervyn Williams (second from right) and Eric Onus (far right).
- 2 Theatre program centre pages.
- 3 Program note on Aboriginal Tribes and Customs.
- 4 Bios of An Aboriginal Moomba 'scriptress', Jean Campbell, and director, 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 Chirnside as Toolaba, the cheiftain.
- 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.











- The first half of "An Aboriginal Moomba" in front of Dres Hardringham's '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
- 13 Handbill for entrepreneur W (Bill) Onus's 1949 Corroboree at Wirths Olympia -- a precursor 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...

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.

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 Moombα was put together in a matter

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

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 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

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 1836ⁱⁱ, 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."

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 offsider 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 Moombα. 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 Cummeragunja 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 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 Moombα 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 southeast 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

- The Federation Jubilee Exhibition of Australian Art in the same year included some Northern Australian bark paintings -- only one with a named author -- and copies of cave paintings on masonite. Referenced in Djon Mundine in They are Mediatating: Bark Paintings from the MCA's Arnott's Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2008, p25.
- ii Christobel Mattingly and Ken Hampton, Aboriginal Literature Development Assistance Association, in association with Hodder & Staughton, Adelaide, 1988, pp76/125.
- iii The Pictures That Moved: A Picture History of the Australian Cinema 1896–1929, Joan Long and Martin Long, Hutchinson Group, Victoria, 1982, p30.
- iv Including Robbery Under Arms (1907), the Wattle (1910), The Assigned Servant, The Squatter's Son, and Moora Neya, or the Message of the Spear (all 1911).

Acknowledgements

With big thanks to: Di Gardiner at the Public Record Office Victoria, Judy Him and Jo and Tiriki Onus for loans; the Victorian Jazz Office for the Georgia Lee poster; and the State Library of Victoria for use of the large An Aboriginal Moomba group image.

FRIDAY









