

# My Urrwai

Created and performed by

**Ghenoa Gela**

Produced by Performing Lines



## Education Resource

*Ghenoa Gela - little sister, daughter, granddaughter, comic, teacher, rebel, gold medallist, air guitarist, charmer, TV star, Torres Strait mainlander, walking political statement – this is her show!*

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Cultural Advisor: Taryn Beatty

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## About This Resource

Why theatre? Why performance? Why tell stories through theatre and performance? These are worthwhile questions to ask. Sometimes telling a story isn't enough and the story teller needs to *show* it, adding movement, music, lighting, and physical action. *My Urrwai* is one such story.

One of the powerful aspects of performance is it is live and immediate. This means you, as audience, are in the same space as the performer, experiencing their story in real time. The performer *needs* you to be there, to share and be part of their world. That is the contract for being in the theatre, a live and powerful one!

This resource has been created to support the 2019 national tour of *My Urrwai*. You might only see *My Urrwai* once so the resource aims to introduce you to the show and its creators, why they made it, what it's about and ways you can use drama, dance, research, writing and critical and creative thinking to respond to the ideas the show presents, and the questions it asks. There is not just one way to respond to a performance so trust how you feel, trust what you want to say about the show and respond accordingly.

If you have the opportunity to participate in a discussion at the theatre, ask Ghenoa about her story, why she wanted to create it and why she chose the performance styles you will see, hear and feel. *My Urrwai* is powerful and personal story telling and this resource is just one small way to develop an understanding.

### DISCUSS (The Arts – Drama, Critical and Creative Thinking)

- What theatre experiences have you already had?
- Have you seen a play or a musical?
- Have you performed on stage?
- What do you recall about these that possibly made you feel excited, nervous, curious etc?
- What is different about seeing a play from watching a film or something on television, streamed or YouTube?

## Links to Learning

This resource offers discussion points and activities that explore Drama, English and Literacy, as well as the capabilities of Critical and Creative Thinking, Intercultural Understanding and Ethical Understanding.

If you are a teacher reading this, the curriculum links are broadly aligned with the Australian Curriculum and there is a table at the end of the resource. However, as the show is touring nationally, you can adapt the focus and outcomes to suit State/Territory curricula and your students' learning needs. The activities are divided into two sections. The first section is designed for before the show, and the second for after the show. However, the resource is intended to be flexible to draw from it as best suits you and your students. Some activities are provided in order to extend curiosity and learning about culture, identity, languages, as well as politics and theatre.

*“Aboriginal people are invisible and they are a minority, and us Torres Strait Islander people, we are the minority of the minority. We are invisible.”*

**Ghenoa Gela**

## Before the Show

### *My Urrwai* - Creative Team

Creator/Performer	Ghenoa Gela
Director	Rachael Maza
Dramaturg/Movement Consultant	Kate Champion
Composer	Ania Reynolds
Lighting Designer	Niklas Pajanti
Set & Costume Design	Michael Hankin
Image by	David Charles Collins

Produced by Performing Lines & Belvoir

Originally presented by Belvoir & Performing Lines in association with ILBIJERRI & Sydney Festival 2018

### DISCUSS (The Arts – Drama)

Consider the above list of personnel who created and produced *My Urrwai*. In contemporary theatre practice more traditional roles of writer, director, and performer tend to become blurred – do you agree?

- What is the role of a director in the theatre?
- Kate Champion is named as Dramaturg/Movement Consultant – What is a dramaturg? Why might a show need a movement consultant?
- What is the role of design in theatre?
- How would each designer work to ensure their design area complemented the other areas?
- How would the creator/performer work with each member of the creative team?

### About the Artist - Ghenoa Gela



Koedal (Crocodile) and Waumer (Frigate Bird) woman Ghenoa Gela is a strong Torres Strait Islander woman from Rockhampton, Central Queensland.

Her background is in Torres Strait Island dance and since receiving a Diploma in Careers in Dance, she has been a Sydney based independent Performing Artist working across Dance, Circus, Television and Stage.

Credits include: *Mura Buai –Everyone, Everyone* - Choreographer/Co-Director with Danielle Micich; *Nothing to Lose* -additional choreography with Kate Champion (Force Majeure); *#GenuaGela* - Performer/Choreographer/Director (Nula Nura Residency, Performance Space); *Move it Mob Style* - Choreographer & In-Studio Host; Top 100, *So You Think You Can Dance Australia* 2014; *Dance Site Booralooka* NT - Facilitator; *The Piper* (My Darling Patricia) - Edinburgh Fringe 2015; *Fragments of Malungoka – Women of the Sea* (Keir Choreographic Award Winner 2016).

Ghenoa also facilitates dance workshops in urban, regional and remote communities. She conducted dance workshops at the inaugural Boomerang Festival, and at regional and remote festivals. A highlight was facilitating a program that helped an Aboriginal community embrace new ways of creating new songs and dances for the future of their community.

Ghenoa is a member of the award-winning **Hot Brown Honey** ensemble, performing regularly around Australia and internationally. Last year she toured nationally with Bell Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Ghenoa's arts practice is inspired by her family stories and her passion to share her Torres Strait Islander culture. She aspires to inspire.

### About *My Urrwai*

*My Urrwai* tells a sensitive and deeply personal story, an autobiographical show weaving together spoken story and movement. It is a significant departure from Ghenoa's previous works *Winds of Woerr*, *Mura Buai* and *Fragments of Malungoka*. It tells a sensitive, deeply personal story and continues Ghenoa's honing of a unique choreographic voice and her own cultural politic and identity.

As a starting point for the process, Ghenoa wrote stories from various stages in her life. During the creative development these informed some extraordinarily bold and provocative material. Dance has been created to explain family lines and relationships, drawn from traditional Torres Strait Islander dance alongside new movement abstractions drawn from contemporary dance and hip-hop. Movement articulates cultural influences playing with her various identities; from the kid sneakily learning 1990's dances from her brothers to physicalising a dark furious part of herself. Ghenoa has a natural acting ability, taking on various characters in her story, and is a natural comic, confirmed by her recent win as a comic at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival's Deadly Funny Awards.

This work is aptly named *My Urrwai*. There is no English word that translates its meaning but URRWAI is a combination of my spirit, my style, my essence. As a contemporary mainland Torres Strait Islander woman, dancer, actor, comedian, all-rounder who carries the responsibility of being the only one able to pass on her Grandmothers dance, the work peels back of the many layers that make up G: Happy G, Funny G, Scary G, Sporty G, and so on revealing the deep heart within. Ghenoa is a multi-disciplinary artist bringing together her multiple talents to tell a very black, very contemporary, unique story.

#### DISCUSS (Critical Literacy)

- In this description of the show what insights do you gain about Ghenoa and her artistic process?
- What insights do you gain about how the performance uses a combination artistic forms ie multi-disciplinary?
- What do you understand about the title of the show, *My Urrwai*?



**DISCUSS** (The Arts – Drama/ Critical and Creative Thinking)

The image above is from the development process of *My Urrwai*.

- Is theatre political? Should it be?
- From your understanding of the show and the artist, is *My Urrwai* political theatre?
- Conduct some research around political theatre, particularly the politics of black theatre in Australia.

## Structure of the Show

*My Urrwai* is nineteen carefully directed and curated stories that have defined Ghenoa Gela’s life so far, and focuses on her experience of ‘otherness’, identity politics and cultural continuity.

Non-linear and episodic in structure, each story within the work is inextricably linked to Ghenoa’s personal experience, culture and identity.

Below is a kind of order of the show’s scenes from the moment the audience enters the theatre:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Introduction – watching, waiting                                    | 10. Phone call with mum - real Island dancing    |
| 2. Totems, wind, language, my mum, my dad, my grandparents, my country | 11. Dance practice, rhythm, and routine          |
| 3. My mother’s home – Torres Strait                                    | 12. But didn’t we lose culture?                  |
| 4. Family in the kitchen   | 13. Back in the kitchen with family              |
| 5. First day at school – what’s your name?                             | 14. Glamming up with my cousin brother           |
| 6. The bible and ballet  | 15. Give it up for Ghenoa Gela, comedian!        |
| 7. Jason in the backyard with girls                                    | 16. This girl walked into the room... Discovery  |
| 8. Dance, lip synch and air guitar                                     | 17. Don’t move...shut your mouth...breathe...    |
| 9. I need your help to tell the story – buying ballet shoes            | 18. As if my culture is just another dance move  |
|  | 19. Dancing and navigating my place in the world |

**Some of the characters who we see or hear about throughout the performance:**

Ghenoa and her many personas			
Mum	Dad	Sister	Police officers
Aunties	Jason (brother)	Brother	Cousins on the Island
Dance teacher	Teacher	Cousin Brother	Shop assistants

**Some of the locations:**

**In these locations we see scenes occur at/in:**

Rockhampton, Queensland	○ Dance class	○ Railway station
Sydney, New South Wales	○ Bloch Ballet boutique	○ Primary school
Torres Strait Islands	○ Aunt’s kitchen	○ Backyard in Rockhampton
	○ Comedy club	○ Community hall

**DISCUSS (The Arts – Drama)**

Having read through the purpose of the performance, the structure, settings and considered the title:

- What do you anticipate you will see and hear?
- How will the performer create the scenes, the settings and the characters?
- How will the performer draw on conventions of theatre, use of space and stagecraft areas?
- Consider the dramatic elements: role and character, relationships, situation, voice, movement, focus, tension, space, time, language, symbol, audience, mood and atmosphere (ACARA, 2018)



Ghenoa Gela, Belvoir Street Theatre, Feb 2018 (All images: David Charles Collins)

**QUESTIONS**

Look at the image above.

- What does this image suggest to you?
- What initially stands out?
- How does the actor's focus draw our focus?
- How does lighting impact?
- What is the relevance of a broom in a theatre space?
- Brainstorm how it could also be used symbolically.

## Background Information

This section of the Education Resource aims to get you thinking about some of the experiences, places, ideas and themes explored in *My Urrwai*.

For instance what do you know and understand about?:

- The Torres Strait Islands (also referred to as TSI); the TSI flag
- Torres Strait Island culture and languages
- Colonial history of Torres Strait Islander people
- Native Title and Land Rights
- National Aboriginal Islander Dance College (NAISDA)
- The significance of culture, identity and family in Indigenous cultures

### Torres Strait Islands (TSI)



The Torres Strait Islands are a group of 274 small islands between the Cape York Peninsula to the south in Australia and Papua New Guinea in the north.

Culturally the islands are divided into five groups and these are represented in the five-pointed star on the Torres Strait Islander flag (see next section).

#### WATCH

National Indigenous TV's (NITV) **10 Things You May Not Know About The Torres Strait:**

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2016/09/29/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-torres-strait-islands>



## The Torres Strait Islander Flag

The Torres Strait Islander flag was designed by the late Bernard Namok from Thursday Island. It was the winning entry in a design competition, held as part of a Cultural Revival Workshop, organised by The Islands Coordinating Council in January 1992. The flag was officially presented to the people of the Torres Strait at the sixth Torres Strait Cultural Festival on 29 May 1992. The flag was recognised by the former national body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in June 1992 and given equal prominence with the Aboriginal flag.

In July 1995, the Torres Strait Islander flag was recognised by the Australian Government as an official 'Flag of Australia' under the *Flags Act 1953*. The flag features a white Dhari (traditional headdress), with a five-pointed white star beneath it. The Dhari is a symbol of Torres Strait Islanders and is used in cultural ceremony and dance. The white five-pointed star symbolises peace, and the navigational importance of stars to the seafaring people of the Torres Strait.

The five-pointed star also represents the five distinct language and cultural groups of the region. The five island groups are:

- Northern islands (Boigu, Dauan, Saibai)
- Eastern islands (Erub, Mer, Ugar)
- Western islands (St Pauls, Kubin, Badu, Mabuiag)
- Central islands (Masig, Poruma, Warraber, lama)
- Southern islands (Kirriri (Hammond Island), Waiben (Thursday Island) and Inner Islands, Northern Peninsula Area and Mainland Australia).



The deep green stripe represents the land, the black stripe is for the people, and the blue is the colour of our seas.

### READ MORE

LINK: <http://www.tsirc.qld.gov.au/our-work/torres-strait-islander-flag>

LINK: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/torres-strait-islander-flag>

## TSI Culture and Languages

### Culture

Torres Strait Islanders have a distinct culture which varies slightly within each island or community. They are a sea-faring people and engaged in trade with people of Papua New Guinea. The culture is complex, with some Australian elements, Papuan elements and Austronesian elements (also seen in the languages spoken).

Like Aboriginal people of mainland Australia, Torres Strait Islanders are traditionally agriculturalists and food is supplemented through hunting and gathering. Cooking and hunting is distinct to the Torres Strait culture and is taught from a young age.

More recent post-colonial history has seen new cultural influences, most notably Christianity.

People of the Torres Strait have a long history of developing stories, crafts and games, including:

- traditional dancing styles performed at celebrations
- storytelling and music (such as singing and drumming) passed down from generation to generation.

TSI people also have private cultural practices involving adoption of children amongst family members and gift-giving within Torres Strait families.

TSI people prefer to use the name of their home Island to identify themselves to outsiders, for example a Saibai man or woman is from Saibai, or a Meriam person is from Mer. Many Torres Strait Islanders born and raised in mainland Australia still identify according to their Island homes.

These practices are present in the performance of *My Urrwai*.

*“My Urrwai is a very personal work. At home we yarn about stuff all the time. It’s quite funny doing a show about my life. It’s all autobiographical and some pretty heavy stories. It is all the feels.*

*One part is liberating because I am talking about it out loud. Serious is not the right work but...legitimate... talking about it all the time can be hard going. It’s good for people to know and it’s good for me to talk about it.”*

**Ghenoa Gela, Interview, Sydney Festival, 2018**

## RESEARCH

The following links offer you further insight into TSI culture including tombstone covering to honour and grieve a family member.

LINK: <https://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/tombstone-unveiling/clip2/>

LINK: <http://www.tsra.gov.au/the-torres-strait/community-profiles>

LINK: <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/torres-strait-islander-culture>

## Languages of TSI

In the production Ghenoa uses cultural language from her home islands. Her father was born on Erub Island (language - Meriam Mir) and her mother on Mer Island (language - Kalaw Lagaw Ya).

There are a number of distinct languages spoken throughout the Torres Strait:

- Kalaw Lagaw Ya
- Kulkalgau
- Kalau Kawau Ya
- Kawalgau Ya.

These are dialects of the Western-central Torres Strait Language (**Kala Lagaw Ya**), and are spoken on the southwestern, western, northern and central islands. They are related to Aboriginal languages.

- **Meriam Mir** is related to Papuan languages and is spoken on the Eastern islands
- **Creole** or **Kriol** is the other language spoken in the Torres Strait.

Creole is a natural language that develops from mixing and simplifying different languages, for instance English and local language. Creole languages exist all around the world as a result of colonisation by countries such as Spain, France, and England. Initially creole languages were developed by colonisers and merchants in order to communicate with local people. However, across time, local creole became a commonly spoken language. For instance, Haitian Creole has over ten million speakers!

### Examples of Creole Phrases and Words

Kriol	English
“Wannem youpla mekem?”	“What are you doing?”
“Wis way?” (The reply is "Same way")	This literally means “Which way” but is used as a greeting
“We yu go?”	Where are you going?
Bala	Brother
Piknini	Child
Dram	Drum
Esso	Thank you
Baba	Father
Fis	Fish
An	Hand
Ed	Head
Mun	Moon
Sabe	Speak
Youpla	You all

**WATCH** the following 6-minute video – it’s a great overview of TSI Kriol!:

**LINK:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_EjWSuUqMY&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_EjWSuUqMY&feature=youtu.be)

### DISCUSS (Critical Thinking/ Literacy)

Consider how you might use different ‘languages’ depending on who – friends, family, teachers, other adults/people - you are communicating with, and how you are communicating – writing, speaking, texting, social media.

- How does your use of language change in different contexts?
- Why do you think it changes?
- Other cultural languages
- Do you have a second/third/other cultural language?
- Consider when you use that language and with whom
- Like Kriol which developed from local language and English, have you incorporated any English words?

## Colonial History

### Invasion and Colonisation of TSI

From 1788, Australia was treated by the British as a colony of settlement, not of conquest. Aboriginal land was taken over by British colonists on the premise that the land belonged to no-one (‘terra nullius’).

The history of Aboriginal dispossession is central to understanding contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. Colonial takeover was based on the assumption that European culture was superior to all others, and that Europeans could define the world in their terms. A colony could be established by persuading the indigenous inhabitants to submit themselves to its overlordship; by purchasing from those inhabitants the right to settle part or parts of it; by unilateral (an action done without agreement by both parties) possession, on the basis of first discovery and then occupation.

Possession of Australia was declared on the basis of unilateral possession. The land was defined as terra nullius, or wasteland, because Cook and Banks considered there were few ‘natives’ along the coast. They apparently decided that there would be fewer or none inland. Their observations were soon proven incorrect. The governors of the first settlements soon found that Aboriginal people lived inland and had special territories and associations with land on a spiritual and inheritance basis. Nonetheless, they did not amend the terms of British sovereignty.

With colonisation came missionaries. The London Missionary Society (LMS) set out to convert people of the Southwest Pacific to Christianity from the 1840s. In July 1871, the Reverend Samuel MacFarlane, a member of the Society anchored at Erub (Darnley Island) in the Torres Strait. He was accompanied by South Sea Islander evangelists and teachers. The presence of missionaries and the introduction of Christianity had long term impact on many people in the Southwest Pacific including Torres Strait Islanders.

On July 1 (Zulai 1, each year, the arrival of the London Missionary Society or the coming of the light as it is called is celebrated in the Torres Strait. TSI people living on the mainland also gather to mark this anniversary.

### READ MORE

[http://www.workingwithindigenoustralian.info/content/History\\_3\\_Colonisation.html](http://www.workingwithindigenoustralian.info/content/History_3_Colonisation.html)

## Native Title and Land Rights

Britain's act of colonising mainland Australia and the Torres Strait Islands resulted in all indigenous

### RESEARCH AND DISCUSS (Critical Thinking/ Ethical Understanding)

What is Native Title?

“The recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people have rights and interests to land and waters according to traditional law and customs”

**LINK:** [https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/mabo-native-title/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI5YOE4pyj3wIVzCMrCh32pwSdEAAAYASAAEqJbsfD\\_BwE](https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/mabo-native-title/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI5YOE4pyj3wIVzCMrCh32pwSdEAAAYASAAEqJbsfD_BwE)

- Discuss the significance of land, and of land rights
- How does one group of people grant the right to own or manage land to another?
- Why do you think land rights took so many years to be granted to Eddie Mabo and his community?

people having no rights to their land, land they had lived on and been custodians of for tens of thousands of years.

Many Aboriginal and TSI people became activists, especially leading into the 1967 referendum where Australians voted to amend the constitution to include Aboriginal people in the census:

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australian-1967-referendum#toc0>.

Subsequent to the referendum Aboriginal and TSI people began to advocate and lobby for their rights in relation to land.

Eddie Koiki Mabo, Sam Passi, Father Dave Passi, James Rice and Celuia Mapo Salee, Meriam men from the island of Mer (Murray Island) in the Torres Straits, were key plaintiffs in a land rights case in the High Court of Australia, today referred to as the ‘Mabo Case’.

**READ MORE** <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/eddie-koiki-mabo>

### DISCUSS (Critical Thinking/ Ethical Understanding)

- What issues does the above information raise about the attitudes of the British in their colonising of Australia?
- What ‘values’ are suggested as being present at the time (late 18th to late 19th Centuries)?
- Why would one race/culture be considered superior to another?
- Has our thinking changed? How will our thinking continue to change? Why?

## NAISDA Dance College (National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association)



Ghenoa Gela, Belvoir Street Theatre, Feb 2018

In the performance Ghenoa speaks about auditioning for NAISDA.

This is an organisation established in 1975 to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in dance. AIDT or Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre was developed from NAISDA and toured nationally and internationally until 1998. Members of the company went on to found Bangarra Dance Theatre.

Consider the significance of establishing a national arts organisation such as NAISDA.

### Why is it so important?

*From Dreamtime to Dance* – a documentary about NAISDA made in 2002:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy5T7HY4Krw>

Bangarra: <https://www.bangarra.com.au/>

## The Significance of Culture and Identity

During the 2018 Sydney Festival, Ghenoa was interviewed by Kate Champion, also a collaborator on *My Urrwai*. The following comments by the performer are presented here for you to reflect on themes and issues in the work such as culture and identity. The full interview can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=9&v=Tgmye32RcQ0\](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=Tgmye32RcQ0\)

### Culture and Community

*“Consulting with family... it’s part of cultural practice... My mum is filtered throughout my show and I had to have her to come down and see the cultural content in my show....*

*I am a choreographer and performer, I find it important that I state I am a Torres Strait artist. When I do, then my whole work will be perceived as a Torres Strait work, so I need to make sure that my work is the best representation of my people even though I am not representing my people. The lines get so blurred.”* Interview, Sydney Festival, 2018

### Identity

*“My Island name is Genoa Gela\*. When I went to school my name was changed to Ghenoa (Jen-o-a). I call myself G. So now I say Ghenoa is my English name, but I prefer to be called ‘G’. I guess you could also say Ghenoa is my stage name.”* Interview, Sydney Festival, 2018

(\*pronounced with a hard G as in great!)

## Family

*“In My Urrwai, I have a responsibility to family, to my stories. The journey is a lot more personal. It’s a part of cultural practice to consult with your family.*

*My mum is mentioned in many bits of the show, and I had to have her come down and see it, where she sits in it, and hear her perception of it as not only my mum, but as a Torres Strait woman.”*  
Interview, Sydney Festival, 2018

## Totems

In the performance, Ghenoa speaks about her totems. On her father’s side, these are the shark and frigate bird. On her mother’s side they are crocodile, the sand shark and the stingray.

One way of describing a totem is a natural object, plant or animal that is inherited by members of a clan or family as their spiritual emblem. Totems define peoples’ roles and responsibilities, and their relationships with each other and creation.

They are an important part of cultural identity and are especially significant in song, dance and music and on cultural implements. Some communities forbid their individuals from eating the animal that is their totem, while other tribes make exceptions for special occasions such as ceremonies.

The Diamond Stingray (Yama) is the totem of the Wuthathi tribe (Shelbourne Bay, Northern Queensland). The stingray is also the totem for some Torres Strait Islanders. Sharks are a totem of the Meriam people from Murray Island or Mer in the eastern Torres Strait islands, and it is forbidden to hunt them.

There is a story about a Meriam man and his son who had an accident at sea and lost their boat. During the night as they waited to be rescued sharks brushed past their legs. The Meriam people believe that sharks did not attack the man and his son, as the shark is their totem animal and would protect them.

### READ MORE

LINK: <https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/indigenous-culture/aboriginal-spirituality/>

LINK: <http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/our-partners/australian-government-agencies>

## REFLECT

Return to the beginning of this resource and re-read the introduction to the work – what new understandings do you now have about culture, identity and art making?

- Why is culture, identity and family important to Ghenoa?
- From your understanding, research and discussion so far, how are culture and performance making linked?
- Why are names important?
- What do you think is the impact of changing someone's name?
- Do you have other names within culture or family?
- Ghenoa speaks about having three totems from her father and mother's sides. Do you have a totem?
- How does reading about Ghenoa's culture and identity enable you to consider your own culture and identity? What resonates for you?

## DISCUSS (Intercultural Understanding/ Critical Thinking)

- How do we “construct” ourselves? What determines who we are?
- How would you describe your community?
- Are any of the following significant to you or your community?
  - Languages
  - Special Events
  - Food
  - Cultural practice
  - Faith



Ghenoa Gela, Belvoir Street Theatre, Feb 2018



**DISCUSS** (Critical Thinking/ Intercultural Understanding)

“**Intercultural understanding** stimulates [our] interest in the lives of others. It cultivates values and dispositions such as curiosity, care, empathy, reciprocity, respect and responsibility, open-mindedness and critical awareness, and supports new and positive intercultural behaviours.

Though all are significant in learning to live together, three dispositions – expressing empathy, demonstrating respect and taking responsibility – have been identified as critical to the development of Intercultural Understanding.” (The Australian Curriculum, 2018)

**CONSIDER**

Having read through the background information offered here about Torres Strait Islands, history and peoples, and the significance of culture and identity as a group discuss:

- What is intercultural understanding?
- Why is it important? Why is it in the curriculum for example?

Personally:

- What does intercultural understanding mean to you?
- What is your understanding of country and connection to country?
- Do you feel similarly to Ghenoa about identity, culture and family?



Ghenoa Gela, Belvoir Street Theatre, Feb 2018

## Interview with Rachael Maza | Director of *My Urrwai*

**Rachael Maza** is a Torres Strait Islander, performer, director and the Artistic Director of ILBIJERRI Theatre Company in Melbourne. Rachael was director and collaborator on *My Urrwai*. Here she speaks about her involvement, process, collaboration and what it means to create a culturally safe space for making work.



### How did you come to be involved in *My Urrwai*?

Ghenoa was familiar with my work and had already begun talking to Performing Lines about the show and requested that I come on board. The other person Ghenoa really wanted was Kate Champion whom she had previously worked with. Ghenoa felt it was really important to have a Torres Strait person in the room to work alongside. Kate and I worked very closely together with her.

### How would you describe the style of this show?

I would describe the show as multi-form. Ghenoa comes from a very strong dance and physical movement background and the way she creates work is through her physical language. So, coming to text and narrative storytelling is a new approach for her but she is an extraordinary actor and you would think that acting was something she had always done. So I would describe *My Urrwai* as *physical, movement based theatre*.

### How did you all decide what stayed in the final piece and what had to be left out?

If you had walked into one of our creative developments you would have seen the wall *plastered with stories, thousands of stories* that emerged through the generative and

development process. So it really was our task to cull the content and to really get to those stories that are the essence of what she wants to say. Ghenoa wanted the piece to be based on her own story but the question for her and us was *which are the stories that she wants to tell, and which are the stories that provide the theatrical arm for what ends up being a one-hour show?*

### Something you mentioned earlier in the interview is the importance of being a TSI person in the room with Ghenoa. How significant was that to the process?

It comes down to two principles. *Who has the authority to tell the story culturally, and the second is to be able to create a culturally safe place*. This means the artist can feel supported when they open up and their heart is exposed. Part of my role was to help create that safe space. Ghenoa understood this and so the creative team were based on who do you ask to be in the room. Having Ghenoa culturally supported was critical to her process. She has a very strong relationship with Kate Champion who is a brilliant artist as well, but for this process there is no separation between Ghenoa and her culture.

Creating culturally safe spaces is something I often talk about and it is critical that we as an industry get to the point where work that is made by us has complete integrity as opposed to work that is made 'about' us. So the person whose story is being told has complete authority in the room about their story and its cultural implications. When Aboriginal and TSI people make work there are two things at play. One is navigating our cultural responsibilities. *We don't just speak for ourselves, we also speak for our mob. The second thing is we artists and we want*

to make great theatre. With whitefellas, they just want to make great work and they don't have the cultural load that comes with being a blackfella.

It's not a burden that 'load', it's what makes us whole and our work rich. I am hell bent on working with our industry so we get to a point where we understand why that is so critically important. It is about time, and about context, and there will be a time possibly when it is a level playing field. When that happens then we will be in a position where anyone can play anyone and anyone can tell anyone's story. We are still so far from the starting block, and we still live in a country that is fundamentally in denial of its history, is fundamentally racist, and we have a long way to go. That is why this way of working and the distinction we make in doing so is critical to moving forward as a theatre industry.

**Rachael, is working in the way you do a 'methodology' for creating theatre and performance – fusing or integrating storytelling, dance, language and art?**

I innately understand the interplay between culture, movement, story-telling, and visual elements. It makes absolute sense and has its own logic why those elements work together. I also understand the extraordinary story is never just story. There is an entire legacy and history of a story, and deep cultural resonances for a story. When you analyse a story just as a story then I feel you are examining it in quite a narrow way. Sometimes it doesn't fit into a neat Western formula!

**Would you talk about the story or stories in *My Urrwai* that Ghenoa tells?**

We all come into a rehearsal room with an agenda. My agenda sits very proudly on my sleeve and I don't hide it. *I am really interested in hero stories* – using Western terminology – how someone navigates the obstacles of life. In this case it's as a blackfella from the Torres Strait, growing up on the mainland, having to tread between, yet be rejected by both worlds -

Ghenoa grew up in an extraordinary world! So how she navigated and came through this is, for me, a hero story. She may have been victimised at times but she is not a victim!

In creating *My Urrwai*, there are a couple of ways to think about story. There is part of the process that is the artist going on a journey to tell their story; then there is something that happens in the honouring or validating of that story through performing and sharing the story to an audience. This is empowering for the artist and is an extraordinary experience for an audience. That is particularly important for a non-Indigenous audience who walk away with a deep impression of this incredible woman.

**What's been your understanding of how audiences have received *My Urrwai*?**

A key question for me as a director is, 'Who is your audience?' and I often ask myself is, 'Can you make work for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences?' I believe if we are committed to getting the balance right between the two components of making theatre we spoke about earlier - bearing in mind that *My Urrwai* is specific to Ghenoa, her culture, her spirituality and her story (only she can play that role) - the performance then resonates on a universal level. There wasn't anyone leaving the theatre who wasn't impacted by that work. The feedback was phenomenal!

The scene in *My Urrwai* where Ghenoa is at the train station actually happened to her during the creation of the show! She told the story of going into a supermarket at Town Hall Station in Sydney and she had all her stuff in two large carry bags and two staff demanded that she empty them both out on the spot and onto the floor so they could check them. Then they just walked off! Then in the show itself, there is a scene where she is standing around at the station on her phone, like everyone around her, and she is the one who is told to move on! And it happened again a few days later. The fact that it

kept happening as we were making the show meant we needed to include it. We realised that the audience needed to know what it was like to live in Ghenoa's shoes, to understand her reality. We played with those scenes a lot in rehearsal, to shape them so that she was almost in a room with blackfellas and this was lesson 101 about how to deal with unsafe situations. So, in staging some of the scenes in the way we did, *everyone in the audience was invited to be part of the conversation – literally. We decided to treat the audience like a room full of blackfellas!*

**What else would you say about the directorial process for this show?**

Well I think I return to the discussion earlier about how important it is to create culturally safe spaces, and that we have authority and control over how the work is made. I will add that having Kate Champion in the room was great and we

very much bounced off each other. She comes to the room with a really strong physical language and that isn't my thing. The point I want to make is that having creative and cultural authority in the room doesn't mean you can't collaborate if it is true collaboration. It means we talk stuff out and try stuff out, Ghenoa had a very strong voice in the room, and the collaboration was authentic between the three of us.

**Have younger audiences seen the show and what has been their response?**

I haven't sat in on an Education show but the conversation has been that the younger audiences have been fantastic, are very vocal, have many, many questions and are really engaged. Students are often the best audiences. They're honest and have very good BS-meters. It gives you hope!



My Urrwai in development 2017 (Images by Jamie James)

## DISCUSS

How do these images of the rehearsal room above capture the creating, directing and collaborative process?

## DIRECTION AND COLLABORATION (The Arts – Drama/ Critical & Creating Thinking/ Literacy/ Intercultural Understanding/ ATSI perspectives)

In the interview Rachael Maza offers a range of insights into working with Ghenoa as an artist, as a TSI person and the process of collaborating on *My Urrwai*. Consider the following elements: Style/ Stories/ Audience/ Collaboration

### The style of the piece

*“I innately understand the interplay between culture, movement, story-telling, and visual elements.”*

- What do you think the director means by the interplay between art forms?

*“I would describe My Urrwai as physical, movement-based theatre.”*

- What does this description of the production conjure in your imagination?
- Have you seen solo performances before?
- Discuss movement-based theatre. How would it differ from dialogue-based theatre?

### Stories – personal and theatrical

*“It really was our task to cull the content and to really get to those stories that are the essence of what she wants to say...and ask, ‘What are the stories that provide the theatrical arm for what ends up being a one-hour show?’”*

- What does the director mean by the ‘essence’ of what the piece needs to say?
- Does the title *My Urrwai* help to add meaning and understanding here?
- Discuss what the director means by selecting stories that enable a ‘theatrical arm’ – are all stories theatrical?
- How are stories we tell each other made ‘theatrical’?

*“I am really interested in hero stories – using Western terminology – how someone navigates the obstacles of life.”*

- What for you constitutes a hero? Who are your heroes?
- What ‘hero’ stories do you already know?
- Are hero stories always epic or can they be about everyday people?

### Audience

*“Who is your audience?” I often ask myself and, ‘Can you make work for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences?’”*

- What are your experiences of being an audience?
- What are your experiences of being a performer?
- Discuss the role of audience in theatre and performance making – do you always need to know who you are making work for?

*“Everyone in the audience was invited to be part of the conversation – literally. We decided to treat the audience like a room full of blackfellas!”*

- Discuss audience participation in a performance. What purpose(s) does it have?
- What are your thoughts on the director’s comment about making work for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people?
- How might audience participation shift our understanding about themes and ideas?

**Collaboration**

*“The point I want to make is that having creative and cultural authority in the room doesn’t mean you can’t collaborate if it is true collaboration. It means we talk stuff out and try stuff out, Ghenoa had a very strong voice in the room, and the collaboration was authentic between the three of us.”*

- What experiences have you had of collaborating to make a performance?
- What more complex ideas is the director raising here about ‘authority’ and collaboration?



Ghenoa Gela, Belvoir Street Theatre, Feb 2018

## After the Show

Use the following questions as prompts to explore the play in performance. Find a way to record responses through writing, shared document, or other digital mode.

As you work through the questions keep considering – *what makes you think or say that, what did you see, hear and/or feel* – in order to provoke reasons for your response.

### QUESTIONS

#### The Space

- What do you remember about the theatre space you saw the play in? What was its design?
- Discuss how different theatres and also where you sit in a theatre might give you a - different experience as an audience.
- What type of world did the characters in the play inhabit – how would you describe it? Contemporary? Historical? Realistic?

#### The Story

- In pairs make some dot points about the main story or stories told in the production – which story stood out for you? Why?
- Did you predict what was going to happen in some scenes?
- How did the performer create two or more different roles?
- How many different places and locations did the story take you to?

#### The Design

- How were the places and locations in the story created on stage? What stagecraft/production area enabled this?
- What did you notice about the costumes? Make-up? Were these significant? Symbolic? Representational?
- What impressions did you gain of the stagecraft / production areas of – set, props, lighting, sound, costume?

#### The Characters

- How did you feel about the main character? Did your feelings change? Why?
- Was the production funny at certain times? If so what aspects made it comic?
- Did you feel you were asked to take sides in this play? If so, which side did you take?
- How important was the audience to the performance? Did you feel you had a role to play?

#### Takeaways

- What was your overall feeling and opinion of the production?
- If you could ask a question of the creative team what would it be?
- How would you describe the play to a friend, a parent, a stranger?

## INTERPRETATION OF IMAGES (The Arts – Drama/ Critical & Creative Thinking/ Literacy)

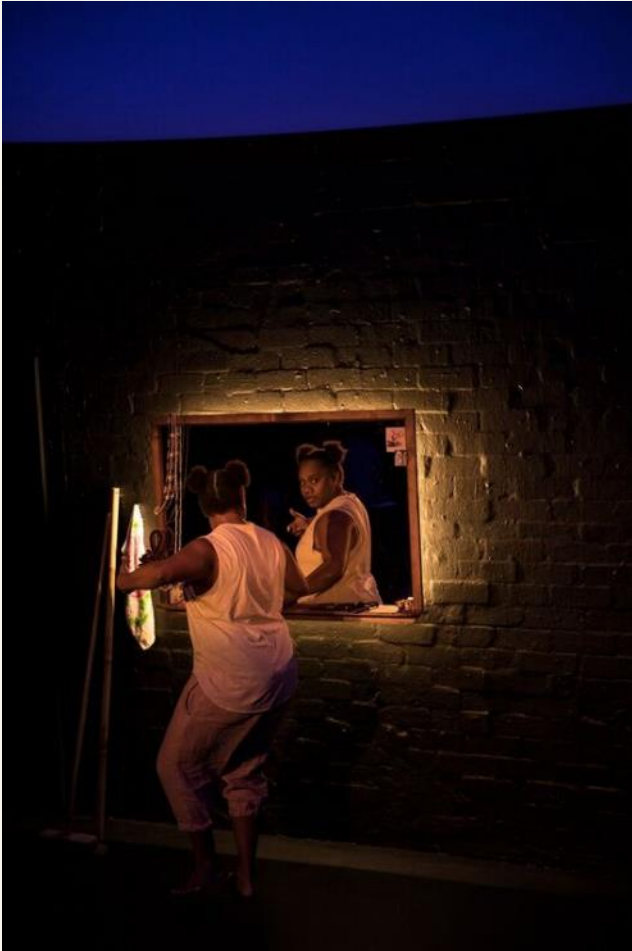
Earlier in this resource you were asked to consider stagecraft/production areas and design in the theatre. Using the production images provided here reflect on how lighting, set, costume and direction were used in the play.

### THEATRE ANALYSIS THROUGH IMAGES

Select one of the four images below.

- Can you recall that moment in the production?
- Where was the scene located?
- Describe the EMOTION or FEELING of the scene. How is this achieved? Consider the dramatic elements: Role and character, relationships, situation, voice, movement, focus, tension, space, time, language, symbol, audience, mood and atmosphere (ACARA, 2018)
- Describe the FOCUS or gaze within the scene – Where is the performer focused? Where is the audience's gaze directed?
- How would you describe the LIGHTING state – day/night, warm/cold, open/focused?
- What SOUNDS can you recall hearing in this scene?
- Select another image and repeat
- Share your interpretations with a partner and compare and contrast how you have remembered and 'read' the images.





Ghenoa Gela Belvoir Street Theatre, Feb 2018 (All images: David Charles Collins)

## Design in *My Urrwai*

Something to consider with set and properties is to think about them in terms of *function, aesthetic and symbolism*. What do each of these terms mean?

**Function** – what is the purpose of the stagecraft area in theatre performance?

**Aesthetic** – colour palette, textures, tones, materials, structure, style of design areas?

**Symbolism** – representation, meaning, emotions/feelings that can be interpreted?

- How would you describe the overall aesthetic of the design of *My Urrwai*?
- What functions did the mirror have?
- What functions did the broom have?
- How were both these set pieces used symbolically?
- Costume – how would you describe it in terms of function, aesthetic and symbolism?
- How was the overall theatre space designed?
- How would you describe the relationship between the performer and audience? Did it shift and change? Was there a fourth wall?
- How did lighting, sound, voiceover and music work symbolically in the performance?
- Overall, how did the design elements integrate to enhance the performer's work?

## Dance and Movement in *My Urrwai*

*The dance explains family lines and relationships, drawn from traditional TSI dance alongside new movement abstractions from contemporary dance and hip-hop. Movement is used to articulate the many cultural influences that inform her various identities; from the kid sneakily learning the 90's dance moves of Janet and Michael Jackson from her brothers, to physicalising some of the difficult personal moments she's faced, to performing her family's and ancestors' traditional dance to her community on Moa in the Torres Strait.*

Performing Lines, Media & Marketing notes, 2018.

- Recall the opening of the performance when Ghenoa dances her arrival in the world, her ancestry, her totems and her naming, and using her Island language to narrate.
- The dance/movement sequence is repeated twice
- How would you describe the quality of the movement used? What did you find recognise or find familiar in the gestures and movements?
- Dance is a language. Dancers learn a movement VOCABULARY. what is your response to this? What type of language? Is it one you know how to 'read'?

## ACTIVITY (Dance – Elements of Space, Time, Dynamics & Relationships)

### *Dancing Your Name*

This activity invites you to interpret your name using movement and gesture referencing the elements of dance. It draws on some of the concepts around narrative and identity-based dance used in the performance of *My Urrwai*.

- Spread out around the room and find your own space to work in
- Use all and any part of your body to create movement and gesture to represent your name
- Close your eyes and say your full name (first, middle, last) in your head a few times. How long is your name? How many syllables does each part of it have? For instance, 'Ghenoa Gela' has five syllables
- Open your eyes
- Begin with your first name and create a movement or movements – one for each syllable
- Repeat this a few times until you feel you have 'learned' or absorbed it
- Do the same with your middle and last names – one movement or gesture for each syllable
- For 'Ghen-o-a Gel-a' that would be five distinct movements or gestures
- Practice your movements and gestures until you feel really comfortable with them
- Pair up and show each other what you have created
- How have you represented your name in movement? Why those choices?

## EXTENSION – Building Choreographic Skills & Embedding Meaning

Now consider how you can adapt and manipulate the movements and develop them into a choreography. You might like to consider your moods and feelings.

- How would say your name when you are happy, angry, sad, whimsical, curious, fearful?
- Say your name aloud with these intentions – what is the dynamic?
- **Dynamics and time:** Now consider how you are executing the movements – fast, slow, punchy, fluid, a combination of these. Play with this and find contrast in the dynamics and timing of the movements that match each particular mood.
- **Space and relationships:** Now consider how you are using space; which direction you are facing; how you are using levels; where an audience may be; the relationship between the movements you are making and space you are occupying; the feeling you want to project
- **Select three feelings or emotions** and create three sequences of your name that reflect these – rehearse and refine thinking about how the sequences are linked
- **Pair up and show each other** your choreography, aiming to read the emotions that were selected
- **Discuss in pairs** what music you might use to accompany/score your choreography

## Music in *My Urrwai*

A range of music and composition is heard throughout *My Urrwai*. The composer, Ania Reynolds, brings together evocative sounds and music to create an aural language for the performance. Recall the opening of the performance where Ghenoa uses movement and spoken language to tell her birth and family story.

This sequence is underscored by a composition of sounds reminiscent of wind and water. It is echoed later in the performance when Ghenoa is telling the story of coming out to her parents and family which is represented through dance and through spoken word.

- What do you recall about these moments and the composition and sound?
- What is the role/function of music and composition in theatre?
- How might music and composition be another 'language' within the performance?

### LEARN MORE

If you are curious to learn more about Ania's compositions for theatre, check out her work at:  
<https://www.aniareynolds.com/>

## DRAMA ACTIVITY (Drama - Making & Responding)

### *Creating a Solo Performance from a Personal Story*

In this activity you are invited to create a mini solo performance from personal story.

Ghenoa states clearly that she is telling personal stories and chooses intentionally which ones to share with an audience.

**Note** – you need to be comfortable with the material you choose and willing to share it with others and in performance.

### **Suggested Stimulus Material**

To assist in creating a story you might find one of the following suggestions helpful

- A childhood photo that captures an event such as a celebration, holiday or birthday
- A funny or touching or other moment that occurred to you more recently
- A piece of music that reminds of you a particular event or happening
- A personal item that evokes a story or memory

### **Structuring the Solo:**

Here are some suggestions:

- **Share your story** in small groups or pairs and hear it said aloud
- **Give each other feedback** – what are the potentially theatrical moments?
- **Formalise it** in writing using given circumstances – who is in it (CHARACTERS), where does it take place (LOCATIONS), what happens (ACTION), why does it happen (INTENTION & MOTIVATION)?
- **Write it down in a sequence** of actions or storyboard it OR **fully script** it
- Select some key points in the story to focus on as **beginning, middle and end**
- Consider AUDIENCE and the PERFORMANCE SPACE you have available
- **Share your planning** with a critical friend and **discuss your choices** – what sounds possible?
- **Create a series of tableaux/freeze frames** that capture key moments in the story – like a physical story boarding. Share these.
- **Create each of the characters** who need to be in the story – who are they, what is their role in the story, how old, gender, characteristics – remember to consider voice, physicality, gesture, focus, movement.
- **Consider theatre conventions** such as direct address, stylized movement, Grotowski's use of transformation of object, verbatim text, mime, realism, symbolism or representation
- **Consider dramatic tension** or comic tension – where might these work best?
- **Rehearse and show**
- **Edit and refine**
- **Perform and share**

### **Reflect**

- How would you describe the experience of performing your own story?
- How would you describe the experience of seeing others' stories performed?
- Does creating your own performed story offer you further insights into Ghenoa's performance?

## SCENE FOCUS – THEMES, ISSUES AND ANALYSIS (The Arts – Drama, Critical & Creative Thinking/ Intercultural Understanding/ Ethical Understanding/ ATSI Histories & Cultures)

As Ghenoa states and as the director emphasises, the stories chosen to be included in the performance were intentional. Here are four scenes/stories selected from the performance for you to explore in more detail and in so doing, consider the key ideas and themes present.

### **Scene: Bible and Ballet**

In this scene, Ghenoa mimes a ballet class. All the while she is creating the class in our imaginations and in her movements and gestures, she is reciting the books of the Bible while classical music plays.

In another part of the show Ghenoa’s mum says to her ‘We celebrated because they brought the Light to the Torres Straits and people found God’ (Context available in Background Information).

- Why do you think the creative team linked the Bible to a ballet class?
- Critically analyse the theme or issue this scene is exploring

### **Scene: Give it up for Ghenoa Gela!**

“Put your hands together for the winner of every competition she has ever entered, put your hands together for Ghenoa Gela, all the way from Rockhampton!”

In this scene, we see Ghenoa playing her stand-up comedian role as if in a comedy club. The routine is about personal experience – where she grew up, sport, going out with friends.

- Why do you think the creative team chose a stand-up routine to include in the show?
- Discuss the function of comedy in the show
- What do you think this scene explores in terms of issues and ideas?

### **Scene: Don’t move...Shut your mouth...Breathe**

The event in this story took place as the production was being written and developed. Ghenoa was waiting on a station in Sydney when she was approached by two police officers and then two others. Accused of loitering, she was eventually ‘escorted’ from the station. Ghenoa talks to the audience and intersperses it with stories of injustice.

- What are the key ideas being explored in this scene?
- Why does Ghenoa involve the audience?
- Were you asked to participate? If so, how did that feel?
- How does breaking the fourth wall impact the scene?
- How did you respond to this scene in the theatre?

### **Scene: This Girl Walked into the Room...**

This scene focuses on Ghenoa’s realisation that she is gay. She struggles. What would her community say? What would her family say? She decides the respectful thing would be to go home and tell them directly, so she flies home to Rockhampton.

- The staging of this film focuses initially on Ghenoa’s hands and on movement with voice over – why do you think this choice was made? What might this symbolise?
- What was your response to this story?

## THEMES, ISSUES AND ANALYSIS – Extension activities

### Political Theatre - Theatre as Politics

Many theatre makers would say that theatre is a political act, and/or that the content of a theatre performance may be intentionally political. Bertolt Brecht's work is one example of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as is Romeo Castellucci's *Theatre of Sleep*, Arianne Mnouchkine's *Theatre du Soleil*, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and South Africa's *Market Theatre*.

In Australia, **The National Black Theatre** in Sydney was established in 1972. You can read and watch an SBS documentary on its establishment, history of performance, and its powerful legacy here: <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/express-yourself/article/2016/06/10/basically-black-legacy-national-black-theatre>

- o What do you already know about political theatre?
- o Have you seen any performances or studied any plays that could be considered 'political'?
- o Is political theatre a form or genre or can the politics reside in the content?
- o What is the role of theatre in contemporary times especially in a global context where the plight and circumstances of people around the world is able to be accessed via social and online news platforms?

### Culturally Safe Spaces

Both Ghenoa and the director Rachael Maza speak about culturally safe spaces and 'black' spaces.

#### Rachael Maza, Director

*"Creating culturally safe spaces is something I often talk about... it is critical that we as an industry get to the point where work that is made by us [Aboriginal and TSI people] has complete integrity, as opposed to work that is made 'about' us. By this I mean the person whose story is being told has complete authority in the room about their story and its cultural implications."*

#### Ghenoa Gela, performer

*"I just want to... I would like to make a black space. I don't really know what that means but I find when I create some of my work it doesn't fit into a particular thing that people want to program; some people find it jarring. It's all about blackfella experience. How can we say what we wanna say in a safe place without it being compromised? We need more blackfellas in the industry, across all of it. We aren't just one thing and I wanna say that by doing it."*

- o Reflect on these two comments and discuss what they might mean
- o What is suggested as being a culturally safe space for artists to work in?
- o Revisit – What is political theatre?
- o In what ways is *My Urrwai* political?
- o *Theatre is a political act*. What does this statement mean?

#### READ MORE

LINK: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/06/political-theatre-nations-debating-chamber>

LINK: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-16/is-modern-political-theatre-so-safe-that-its-meaningless/10300362>



Ghenoa Gela, *My Urrwai*, Belvoir Street Theatre, Feb 2018

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

In the Australian Curriculum, ATSI Histories and Cultures is embedded as a cross-curriculum priority. In particular, the curriculum states that this priority is designed ‘for all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world’s oldest continuous living culture’ (ACARA, 2018). The curriculum further states, ‘students will understand that Identities and Cultures have been, and are, a source of strength and resilience for Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples against the historic and contemporary impacts of colonisation’ (ACARA, 2018).

#### ACTIVITY

Read the following extract from a 2018 interview with performer, Ghenoa Gela.

*“There is a large number of Australians who do not know the difference between Aboriginal people and TSI people – so I make a point to represent the difference. On one hand, I want to bring visibility to Torres Strait Islander people on the other hand I am representing myself.*

*It has been a journey trying to figure out what is black theatre. How do I tell this story? How do I put my story in a space that is usually occupied by white theatre? This is something that I am still exploring and probably will continue to do, with every work I create from now on, and My Urrwai is the beginning of this path I am now curious to investigate.*

*Our culture can be expressed in all art forms. We are complex human beings, and I myself do not intend to be confined into one category.”*

#### QUESTIONS:

- What do Ghenoa’s words offer you in terms of understanding histories and cultures of Torres Strait Islander people?
- After having seen the performance of *My Urrwai*, and undertaken some research, discussion and analysis, what deeper understandings do you have about Torres Strait Islander people’s history and culture?
- What questions do you have?



## THEATRE CRITICISM AND ANALYSIS - REVIEWING THE REVIEWERS

(The Arts – Drama, Literacy)

### What is the purpose of a theatre review?

UK Guardian reviewer and critic, Lyn Gardner, is a veteran at writing for the theatre. She offers some advice here: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2012/oct/04/theatre-criticism-cat-hot-tin-roof>.

However, if you are studying Drama/Theatre the curriculum may dictate how you are to write and what you are to write. **Describe, analyse, evaluate, discuss, compare, contrast** are often terms you encounter in a writing task about performance/theatre analysis.

Read the following extracts from three reviews of *My Urrwai*. You can follow the link to the full review if you wish.

#### **Review 1 - The Sydney Morning Herald | Joyce Morgan | 23 January 2018**

LINK: <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/my-urrwai-is-a-spirited-tale-from-the-torres-strait-20180122-hom2vw.html>

We feel Gela's nervousness and delight at finally performing on her ancestral island the dances that had not been seen there in decades. We learn that she is now the only person who can teach the traditional dance her grandmother taught her.

With a few simple props on a bare space in Belvoir's tiny downstairs theatre – and with Kate Champion as movement consultant and dramaturg – Gela's physical agility is compelling.

In just an hour, Gela covers a lot of ground – from the impact of Christianity on island life, to a critique of arts funding and training – as she navigates her way between traditional and contemporary worlds.

*My Urrwai*, which roughly translates as "my spirit", is a wide-ranging tale from a performer whose strong, determined spirit seems destined for bigger stages.

#### **Review 2 - Theatre Now: On the Town | Fiona Hallenan-Barker | 24 January 2018**

LINK: <http://www.onthetown.net.au/theatre-now-review-my-urrwai/>

Taking a pivotal moment in her life: performer and creator Ghenoa Gela spins yarns linguistically, physically and emotionally into a fascinating story web. From a small town in Queensland, via Sydney to the Torres Strait Islands we are invited on the journey of a granddaughter, daughter, girlfriend, dancer, comedienne, and all round fierce and funny woman.

Like all good theatre makers Ghenoa knows how to win our hearts with laughter before making us cry. There is honestly something for everybody in this work and by giving so much of herself in the specificity of the story, the universal themes open up. From stand-up comedy and breakdancing, to ancestral awareness reminiscent of Greek tragedy, it is a riveting tale that she weaves. This is actually a very positive story; yes, there are sad and shocking elements but the beauty and richness is what you take away.

It has every element of the perfect play – music, comedy, dance, drama, a warm heart, a serious edge and the capacity to make you think deeply about the themes and issues raised. Ghenoa is an artist exploring her powers and has collaborated with the cream of the crop to edit *My Urrwai* from an epic story to a very neat 65 minutes.

**Review 3 - Suzy Goes See | Suzy Wrong | 20 January 2018**

**LINK:** <https://suzygoessee.com/tag/performing-lines/>

In *My Urrwai*, Gela shows us what it is like to be a woman of native heritage living in modern Australia, bringing particular focus to the unjust burden that black people have to bear, whilst existing on their own rightful lands that white people had forcefully usurped.

Part of the tale involves a significant first visit to Gela's extended family in the Torres Strait Islands, where she finds herself in moments of alienation, as well as extraordinary connection. *My Urrwai* is, among many things, a deep meditation about the need to belong, and with it, we examine the hugely important themes of displacement and repudiation as experienced by our First Nations peoples for 230 years and counting.

Formative and crucial fragments of Gela's life are compiled intelligently, for an autobiography that feels impressively comprehensive in its scope. Even though (it) does contain colourful idiosyncrasies, the earnest care with which it discusses issues of race is unmistakable, as it is probably inevitable that this one-woman show would be called upon to represent entire communities. The need for more productions featuring TSI voices... cannot be overstated.

As performer, Gela is an outstanding talent, combining years of training in stage disciplines, with an enviable presence, to produce the consummate storyteller. Her remarkably exacting and agile physicality, plus an uncanny ability to speak with great resonance, sonorous and philosophical, are the key ingredients in this wonderfully moving piece of theatre. Proving himself to be equally accomplished, is lighting designer Niklas Pajanti, whose work accurately prompts a wide range of emotional responses, from transcendent beauty to chilling terror.

Director Rachael Maza's sensitive manipulations of space, ensures that each scene is received crystal clear, whether in their inception, intent or purpose.

**ACTIVITY** Revisit the review extracts above and select one to focus on.

- Examine closely what aspects of the production it is commenting on
- Underline what you believe to be keywords
- What information and evaluation is contained in the extracts above?
- What do you learn about the play?
- What areas of the production are discussed?
- Does the writer adopt a positive/negative/analytical/critical tone?
- Do you agree/disagree with the reviewer with regard to their comments/analysis?
- Justify your response to the review – does it match your experience of the play?
- What would you write if you were reviewing that particular aspect of the play?
- Consider if a review can have an emotional response or a personal response.
- What emotional or personal responses did you have to aspects of the performance?

*My Urrwai* is not so much a coming of age story of a young woman; it's more of a coming of age story of all of us, and how far we have to go in our understanding of the First Peoples.

*Ghenoa knows herself; it's the rest of us as a nation that have the growing up to do.*

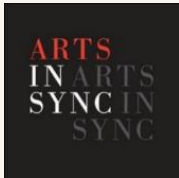
## CURRICULUM LINKS: THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM – Years 9/10

LEARNING AREA	ORGANISING STRANDS	SUB-STRANDS / DESCRIPTORS
The Arts: Drama	<i>Making</i>  <i>Responding</i>	Improvising, devising, playing, acting, directing, refining, interpreting, rehearsing, presenting, performing  Being an audience, listening to, enjoying, reflecting, analysing, appreciating and evaluating own and others' drama work
The Arts: Dance	<i>Making</i>  <i>Responding</i>	Elements of dance, skills techniques and processes, movement vocabulary, improvising, exploring selecting, creating and structuring to communicate intentions  Appreciating, describing, explaining, evaluating and critically analysing their own dances and other dances viewed
The Arts: Music	<i>Making</i>  <i>Responding</i>	Listening, analysing and comparing, developing aural skills as a technique for discriminating, composing improvising, creating, collaborating, writing and recording  Identifying, interpreting and analysing musical concepts, appreciating, describing, explaining, evaluating and critically analysing
Literacy continuum	<i>Elements</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehending texts through listening, reading and viewing</li> <li>• Composing texts through speaking, writing and creating</li> <li>• Visual knowledge</li> </ul>

GENERAL CAPABILITY	ORGANISING ELEMENT
Intercultural understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognising culture and developing respect</li> <li>• Interacting and empathizing with others</li> <li>• Reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility</li> </ul>
Ethical understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding ethical concepts and issues</li> <li>• Reasoning in decision making and actions</li> <li>• Exploring values, rights and responsibilities</li> </ul>
Critical and creative thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inquiring – identifying, exploring and organising information and ideas</li> <li>• Generating ideas, possibilities and actions</li> <li>• Reflecting on thinking and processes</li> <li>• Analysing, synthesizing and evaluating reasoning and procedures</li> </ul>

CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES	KEY CONCEPTS
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection to Country/Place</li> <li>• Celebration of unique believe systems that connect people physically and spiritually to Country/Place</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity of culture through language, ways of life, and experiences as expressed through historical, social and political lenses</li> <li>• Kinship structures and significant contributions of ATSI people at local, national and global level</li> </ul>
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### About the Writer:

Meg Upton is an arts educator, arts researcher, lecturer and writer. She teaches drama and theatre education at Deakin University. Since 2000 she has worked as both an education manager and teaching artist with Malthouse Theatre and Melbourne Theatre Company.

Other companies Meg has worked with include Arena Theatre Company, KAGE Physical Theatre, Polyglot, Arts Centre Melbourne, Theatre Works, Platform Youth Arts, Ilbjerri Theatre Company and Victorian Opera. She has a PHD from the University of Melbourne that explores the pedagogies of teaching theatre analysis in senior drama.

Meg has created over one hundred education resources in the past eighteen years for theatre and dance companies, touring companies, playwrights, ABC Splash, Education Services Australia and recently for the Australian Federal Police and Attorney General’s Department. In the past five years she has presented her research and practice at conferences in Paris, Singapore, New Zealand, New York, Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra and Hobart.

Meg has been a national board member for Drama Australia, and Young People and the Arts Australia. Currently Meg is a board member of Drama Victoria and RAWCUS (a theatre company for people with and without disabilities), and Vice President of the Victorian Green Room Association Awards and is the Education Curator for Australian Plays (The Australian Script Centre).

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### About the Cultural Advisor:

**Taryn Laleen Beatty** is of Torres Strait Island descent on her mother’s side (Moa & Darnley Islands) and Aboriginal descent from her father’s family (Wuthathi Tribe). Taryn was born in Mossman (Kuku Yalangi), 80km north of Cairns (Yidinji), Queensland. Taryn graduated from NAISDA Dance College and has since performed and taught extensively, including performing with the acclaimed Bangarra Dance Company at the Closing Ceremony of the Atlanta Olympic Games.

Taryn started a family dance group called *InDidgDance* which includes her family members that are all involved in the arts through the music, film and dance scenes. *InDidgDance* have performed at the UN Headquarters in New York City, Craft & Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, Australian Festival in Nashville and various Native American Pow Wows. Overseas tours also include Japan, China, Korea, Abu Dhabi, France, Spain and New Zealand.

Recently Taryn has been working as an Aboriginal Education Officer in a local Sydney high school and is currently in her 2nd year of study for a Bachelor of Education degree (ACU). She continues to perform and share Indigenous culture through performances and workshops nationally and internationally.

