

# The tragedy of the "stolen generation"

Stolen, directed by Wesley Enoch, written by Jane Harrison

Gabriela Notaras  
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*Stolen* is an honest and compassionate work that traces the lives of five Aboriginal children removed from their families in the 1960s under official Australian government policy. Written by Jane Harrison, the play dramatises the fear, persecution and desolation felt by the children and their families, and demonstrates the ongoing physical and psychological impact of this policy on generations of Aboriginal people. Harrison and all the cast are of Aboriginal descent. Pauline Whyman, one of the actresses, is the last of 11 children who were stolen from her family of 15.

Following Britain's colonisation of Australia in 1788, Aborigines were hunted like animals from their tribal lands and by the early part of the 20th century reduced to desperate poverty. Considered to be a race that served no useful purpose, the government sought to eliminate all traces of Aborigines and their culture. Aboriginal children who were "half-caste" would be removed from their families and placed in mission or welfare homes, ostensibly to provide them with a better standard of living and an education.

These children, it was hoped, would then assimilate and intermarry into mainstream society. As A.O. Neville, Western Australian Protector of Aborigines, declared at a 1937 conference: "Are we to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?"

This process was assisted by the church, which ran the missions where, it has now been revealed, many children were subjected to physical, psychological and sexual abuse. The children were given little or no education and often went hungry. They suffered the same fate at the hands of employers, who put them to work as farm hands or domestic helpers. The policy of removing children continued until the 1960s.

*Stolen*, which is set in a welfare home for stolen children, opens with the five characters, each holding a

suitcase and standing on a sparse, half-lit stage, with a didgeridoo droning ominously in the background. After several minutes, the lights brighten and the characters, as children, begin unpacking and talking, while taking in the drab surroundings of their new home.

The play proceeds through a series of episodes rather than a straightforward linear plot. This helps to provide a concrete picture of each individual whilst demonstrating how being separated from their families has affected their lives. The only props are five iron institutional beds and a green filing cabinet. Letters are taken from the cabinet during the play and read aloud. This provides a time frame and highlights the desperate attempts of parents to locate their children.

Kylie Belling is particularly strong as Ruby, an emotionally and physically abused young girl descending into madness. Ruby is taken on weekend outings by a visitor to the home and sexually abused. She returns, her hair matted, dress torn and a look of fear and shame in her eyes. She drags a doll behind her; a gift to ensure that keeps the abuse a secret. The doll becomes Ruby's only companion and she talks to it as if it were her child. All her feelings of rejection and loss, her hopes and fears, are conveyed through her conversations with the doll.

Later, when Ruby is lucid and realises the horrific circumstances of her young life, she screams pathetically for her mother. She is employed as a domestic helper but the employers treat her no better than a stray dog. She is forced into backbreaking work and subjected to more sexual abuse and beatings. Her innocence crushed at such a young age, Ruby's terrifying descent into madness is both convincing and understandable.

Jimmy's fate is equally tragic. Taken from his mother at the age of two, Jimmy (Elliot Maynard) is a mischievous boy with a sense of humour. Eager to be adopted so that he can have a family, Jimmy's hopes are crushed after realising that he will never be chosen for adoption because he is considered too dark. Like Ruby, he is

sexually abused and becomes a sullen, introverted teenager and then an angry morose adult, suffering from alcoholism and prone to explosive fits of anger that repeatedly land him in jail.

One day Jimmy, who had been told that his mother died when he was a boy, discovers, while drinking in a bar, that his name is Willie and that his mother is still alive. Filled with child-like excitement but anxious about his mother and how he should respond when they meet, he is abused by racists and drawn into a brawl, which lands him in jail. In the next scene Jimmy's ageing mother places 26 birthday gifts on the stage, one for every year her son was taken from her. Slowly she packs them up and then collapses, dying of grief. In jail, Jimmy reads of his mother's death. The opportunity to feel a sense of kinship, to know his only family, his history, his roots, has been cruelly blown away. He feels defeated and utterly alone.

In one of *Stolen*'s most moving scenes, Jimmy forms a noose with his belt and declares: "Don't let them take babies from their mother's arms. Someone's gotta fight. I just can't no more. They stuck a knife into me heart and twisted it so hard. Prison don't make ya tough, it makes ya weak, your spirit just shrivels up inside. I'm going now, to be with my mother. I can't fight. I'm punched out."

That Jimmy takes his life is tragic enough, but what makes it real, believable, is the knowledge that he is like thousands of young Aboriginal men, that his efforts to find something worth living for have been fruitless. But while Jimmy's death symbolises the final crushing of his spirit, it is also a desperate appeal for someone to fight the injustices that he and others have suffered.

While not all the children depicted suffer the fate of Ruby and Jimmy, they were all affected—people without roots, always conscious of an emotional void, that something is missing in their lives.

Shirley (Pauline Whyman) remembers crying through the back window of the car that took her to the welfare home. The image of her mother disappearing in the distance troubles Shirley all her life. Sandy (Robert Patten) recalls his mother packing him off to different family relatives, with instructions to stay away from the roads to avoid being caught and taken by the "welfare people". "Always on the run," he pants lugging the suitcase, which contains his only worldly possessions, wherever he goes. Sandy, who drifts from job to job, is paid less because he is black. He feels out of place in the big, unfriendly city and returns to the "red sand", his memory of home before being separated from his mother.

Anne (Tammy Anderson), adopted by a middle class

white family at an early age, has enjoyed a relatively comfortable existence and therefore faces slightly different problems. Eventually told that her blood mother is still alive, she is deeply confused and concerned. Anne wonders whether she should consider herself black or white and how to approach her original parents. She expects them to be living in the bush, tribal fashion but is bewildered to find them poverty stricken and living in a cramped city apartment. Anne tries to approach the problems with jokes and light-hearted banter but underneath her bravado she is unable to deal with the many complex emotional questions confronting her.

Wesley Enoch, director of the Belvoir Street production, and the entire cast have succeeded in synthesising the many, almost fragmented episodes of *Stolen* to produce a powerful artistic work. First commissioned by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Co-operative in 1992, Harrison's critically acclaimed play was included in the 1998 Melbourne Festival, recently played at Sydney's Belvoir Theatre and is currently performing in London.

*Stolen* gives flesh and blood to a policy that has impacted on the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal families and helped to produce the high incidences of alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness and suicides. Hopefully the more thoughtful of those able to attend performances of this play will be motivated to examine more critically the underpinnings of the social order that embraced and continues to defend such a policy.



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