

A gentle appeal for justice

Aliwa, by Dallas Winmar Directed by Neil Armfield at the Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney

Kaye Tucker
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Aliwa, a recent joint production by Company B in Sydney and the Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre Company from Western Australia, is set in the south of Western Australia in the 1930s. It tells the story of the Davis family—half-caste Aborigines who battled attempts by Australian authorities to break up their family and relocate the children to government settlements. Author Dallas Winmar, a producer-director with ABC Radio and author of a biography on the late Aboriginal playwright Jack Davis, was commissioned to write the play in 1999. She developed the work from a series of lengthy interviews with Dot Collard, Ethel Abdullah and Judith (Jude) Wilks—three of the 10 children in the Davis family. Dot Collard, now in her 70s, appears as a narrator and oversees the actors on stage during the performance.

The play begins with Jude's discovery of official government records of her family's history—letters her mother sent to or received from the infamous A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia (WA). The post of Chief Protector was created in 1904 after a government inquiry into the social conditions of Aborigines in that state. Concern over the growing numbers of half-caste children, many fathered by pastoralists who made little attempt to educate or support them, was seized upon by the government to institute the *Aborigines Act 1905* which laid the basis for state control over WA's Aborigines and made the Chief Protector the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and half-caste child under 16 years.

Police rounded up indigenous children living in and around the northwest towns of the state and sent them to Catholic Missions. In 1909 a regulation was passed dispensing with the need for the police to obtain permission from the Chief Protector to remove half-caste children under the age of eight from their families. The Davis family, like many others, grew up under the cloud of fear produced by these racist policies.

A. O. Neville, who was appointed Chief Protector in 1915 and held the position until 1940, was committed to creating a

“White Australia” and played a key role in establishing the government-run “native settlements”. It was through these settlements that government officials hoped to “breed out the colour” and bring about the biological disappearance of Aborigines. The first step towards achieving this goal was to segregate “half-castes” from the “full-bloods” and remove the babies and children from Aboriginal settlements and camps. Many Aborigines used the name “Aliwa wadjell” or “Watchout! There's a white fella about!” as a euphemism for the Chief Protector's Office.

Jude, the youngest sister, knows little of this past but wants to find out more. Ethel, her older sister who remembers only too well the horrors of those days, is fiercely opposed to Jude digging through the old files or even discussing this history. Eventually Dot and Jude convince Ethel to join them on a trip to the town where they grew up. The play then proceeds through a series of flashbacks, beginning in 1932, when the family moves from Waroona to Yarloop, a small timber and mining town, where their father secures a job at the local mill. The job comes with a company house and although the dwelling has dirt floors and corrugated iron sheets for walls, it is like heaven for the Davis family because they can all live together.

For the all-white local community, the arrival of the Davis family is not so welcome. With the 1930s Depression weighing heavily on workers and their families, many accuse Davis of “taking the job of a white man”. When the Davis children present themselves at the local school the teacher tells them that education department permission is required before they can attend, because there are no other “native” children at the school.

As Ethel tells the audience: “We were the only Aboriginal kids going to school and we got the lot. I used to hate fighting but my little sister Dot would fight tooth and nail. She made fun of many of the boys. Her school case was her weapon and she used to put a couple of heavy books or stones in it ... never did she back away from them.”

Despite the racism and grinding poverty, the Davis family creates a bearable life for themselves. “In Yarloop we wanted for nothing,” Dot said. But tragedy strikes the family and life changes radically for the worse when the girls’ father is killed in a hunting accident. Alice, their mother, is left with 10 children between the ages of 20 years and seven months to feed. Fear that the Chief Protector’s Office will disperse the family becomes a constant and unwanted companion.

A letter found by Jude from the local police constable to the Chief Protector testifies to this real and ever present danger: “[T]here are a number of children, members of this Davis family, who could with advantage be removed to an institution and in my opinion should be removed in the interest of other children in the district.”

Alice, who was taken from her family when she was four years old, placed in a mission and then trained to be a domestic servant in white homesteads, is determined not to let this happen to her children. But five months after her husband’s death, the mill owners tell her that the family has to vacate the company house. The distraught woman, who has little money and no immediate relatives, gathers up her children and travels by train to Brookton in the hope of finding a friend to help her. Alice and the children set up camp on the outskirts of the town with other homeless Aborigines and struggle to survive on state rations and whatever she can earn from domestic work.

These years are difficult and they take their toll on the family. At one stage Alice writes to the Chief Protector: “I am writing to ask if you will let me have some milk for my baby. She cannot be expected to survive on flour and tea alone. Could you also supply me with a bar of soap to wash the kiddies and some meat? Yours sincerely, Mrs. A Davis.” The reply was in the negative, except for the bar of soap!

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Eventually, after Ethel marries and leaves home, Alice asks her to raise Jude, the youngest child, to prevent the Chief Protector putting the youngster in a settlement. Alice is killed in an accident while Jude is in Ethel’s care. This is why Jude, who never really knew her mother, secures the family files and desperately wants to visit Yarloop where she was born.

Aliwa was performed in a simple storytelling manner with the Belvoir Street theatre transformed into a bush camp. The actors improvised on a stage floor covered in dirt with walls of bed sheets and corrugated iron and veteran Aboriginal musician Robert Bropho performed country-style music. Playful and tender, even naive at times, *Aliwa* is a gentle appeal for justice, showing how the family, held together by their mother’s love and determination, battled ignorance,

prejudice and state interference. “Just walk away” was Alice’s constant refrain, unable to find a way to fight the oppressive conditions forced upon her.

However, while *Aliwa* succeeds in providing its audience with an understanding of the plight of the Davis family, the play often fails to fully actualise the inherent drama of their story. The actors—Ningali Lawford as Alice, Deborah Mailman as the young Dot, Kylie Belling as Ethel and Dot Collard as herself—work hard to engage the audience, but the play tends to skim along the surfaces of events, more intent on providing an easy night’s entertainment than a serious exploration of how the Davis family reacted as they were hounded from pillar to post by the Chief Protector.

This is not to say that the play does not provide an intimate understanding of the dreadful conditions imposed on the family. The end of the first act is particularly moving when the young Dot is told by her mother that she cannot take the family dog with her on the journey to Brookton. A small thing, perhaps, but this moment, and the depth that Deborah Mailman brings to it, speaks volumes about the impact of government policies on the children and Aboriginal people as a whole. Unfortunately there are few occasions that reach this emotional level.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the dramatisation of the Davis family story and other moving accounts that have begun to find their way onto stage and screen are an important contribution to artistic and cultural life because they help to set the historical record straight. Every attempt to expose the record of Australia’s ruling establishment and undermine the carefully cultivated myth of Australia as some sort of egalitarian society deserves to be nurtured and encouraged.



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