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THE CHARACTERS

The characters in this play are five children, all of whom have been placed in the Cranby Children’s Home.

**Jimmy**
Changes from a lively, happy child to a silent, angry, hostile man. Told that his mother is dead but continues to search for her. Abused by the white people he visits as a child. His mother dies before he has a chance to meet her. Hangs himself in a prison cell.

**Ruby**
Taken from her family at a very early age. Longs for her mother and a loving family. Sexually abused by the white couple she visits as a child. Goes mad and in the end cannot communicate with the family she has yearned for when they make contact with her.

**Sandy**
Comes into the children’s home at an older age. Strongly influenced by his mother — sustained by his memories of her. ‘Always on the run’. Moves regularly to avoid the Welfare. Storyteller of the group — keeps the tradition alive for himself and the other children.

**Shirley**
Strong, comforting presence in the children’s home. Her daughter, Kate, and son, Lionel, are taken from her. Never stops searching for her family. Later finds Kate and re-establishes a relationship with her. Loves being a mother and grandmother.

**Anne**
Adopted by a well-off white couple and given material comforts. Not close to her white parents. Is shocked when she finds out she is Aboriginal. Torn between both her families, confused about her identity and where she belongs.
Jane Harrison’s play *Stolen* highlights the traumatic experiences of Indigenous Australian children who were removed from their families — children who have come to be known collectively as the Stolen Generation. *Stolen* was first staged in a joint production by the Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative and Melbourne’s Playbox Theatre in March 1997. Since then, *Stolen* has received widespread critical and popular acclaim, both within Australia and internationally.

The issue of the Stolen Generation (really generations) is one of the most confronting, and for a long time suppressed, issues in Australia’s history. Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities from the first days of the European occupation of Australia. Almost all Aboriginal families were affected across one or more generations by the removal of children between 1910 and 1970.

When the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) held a national inquiry into the matter in 1995 and 1996, and published their report, *Bringing Them Home*, the destructive effects of the policies of assimilation and segregation were exposed to all.

*Stolen*’s five children have been placed in the Cranby Children’s Home. Two of them, Ruby and Jimmy, suffer so deeply that one descends into madness and the other hangs himself in a prison cell. Another child, Anne, is adopted, but for a number of years she has no knowledge or memory of her Aboriginal family. Shirley and Sandy maintain their Aboriginal identities and hope to return to their families. Shirley plays a major role as the mother figure, helping the children to remain strong.

The children are desperate for outside contact, but Ruby and Jimmy return from visits to white families abused, confused and ashamed. Starved of affection, longing for their families, the children deeply emotionally scarred.

*Stolen* challenges the stereotypical attitude that the removal of Indigenous children from their families was in the children’s best interests. Even today, many of these children still do not know where they come from or which family they belong to. But they understand where they have been and the suffering it caused them. *Stolen* has taken the plight of these children to the world — and Aboriginal people continue to wait for an apology.
AUTHOR INTERVIEW

An Interview with Jane Harrison

Indigenous writer Jane Harrison is a descendant of the Murrwari people of New South Wales. She lives in country Victoria and works on a voluntary basis with Aboriginal youth developing street drama at Rumbulara Aboriginal Cooperative in Shepparton.


Marlene Drysdale: I would like you to tell me something about the characters: what is your perception about the characters, firstly Jimmy?

Jane Harrison: I will just give you an overall idea of the brief that was given to me by Ilbijerri (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Theatre Co-operative) because the work was commissioned. They wanted it to be a play that wasn’t just one person’s story; it showed a range of issues and a range of stories. We came up with the idea of the five different characters and I suppose each of them had a different experience in life, all having had the experience of being taken from their families but the end result of their life varied.

So, Jimmy I saw as being the cheeky kid — pinched the apples because he was hungry. He had a reason for doing it; he wasn’t just a bad kid but always positive, the one who was always waiting for someone to come and rescue him. He had a lot of hope, shining, bright, happy kid who gradually, through life experiences, had that kind of bashed out of him really.

I see him as the kid who first got in trouble as a young boy, maybe for pinching the apples, then the police get involved and then eventually he is the one who ends up incarcerated and continually told in the Children’s Home that his mother doesn’t want him, that she’s dead and that the light goes out of his life and he ends up just without hope, I suppose. Although, he’s still got that kernel of longing to believe. All the time he was told that his mother had died, that part inside him was hoping that she was still alive until, unfortunately, when he is told that his mother is alive and is looking for him. In a short space of time she dies, before they get a chance to meet.

Although that seems almost melodramatic, I found so often in researching the stories that that happened because it is a fact of life that Indigenous people don’t have the life expectancy of non-Indigenous people. So many
people had that experience of being re-united taken away from them, so it was a last blow.

M: The Stolen Generations certainly highlighted a lot of that. Let’s talk about Ruby.

J: Ruby I saw as a child who was taken away at a very early age, as a baby, so she didn’t have any mothering experience at all. So she had to kind of imagine that. The play wasn’t meant to be set in any particular era but I saw Ruby as being very much a victim of those policies where they took kids away and put them in the missions or the Children’s Home. There they trained them up to be domestics and that was the only expectation that that era of children knew. Then as young 13 year-olds they went into the white home, did the domestic work and were probably abused by the family that they were with; that is her story. Again one of a spiral downwards, a spiral into mental illness. When her family finally do locate her, there’s really not much left of poor Ruby.

M: What about Shirley?

J: Shirley I see as the strong kind, maternal, the earth mother, who even though she was taken away as a child — and I wanted to show the generational thing that children who were taken away, often had their children in turn taken away — so even though she had that experience, I think she’s got a strength to her, the one who never gives up hope, never stops looking for her children. She can’t go back to her mother, that experience is not available to her, but she can keep looking for her children and keep the hope alive. She looks to the future of her grandchildren, so she is a very strong, earthy woman.

M: She comes across fairly much like that in the play too. Then there was Sandy.

J: Sandy — I suppose I saw him coming into the Children’s Home at an older age, so he still has a bit of his culture. He’s the one who tells a story, he knows a few of the words; he keeps that alive for the other children by telling them the stories and some of the words. He’s someone who has had the experience of having been moved on a lot in his life, from an early age trying to keep away from the welfare, and stuff like that. His whole ‘arc’ as a character is that, finally at the end he wants to go home, back to his place. So he’s got a strong connection to the land I think.
M: The spirituality is still there. The last character is Anne.

J: Anne is the one who most resembles me in a way. Anne is the person who’s brought up in a white family, who doesn’t even know she’s Indigenous — and I think that’s what probably happened to a lot of us who have a fairer complexion. Anne discovers that she’s got an Aboriginal mother and kind of has to really juggle with that, with what it means to her — her identity — how she feels about the family who adopted her and all those issues about going back and being confused and confronted with a whole lot of people. She doesn’t even know which one of them is her mother — that kind of thing, really having to juggle with who she is. At the end of the play she’s not really resolved about who she is, but she’s had a more positive experience, tied up in neat little bows, [than] any of the characters really.

M: There was a lot of dislocation in each character’s life and I think that’s part of that broken jigsaw that we seem to have. When you started to write the play, what was the inspiration to do it?

J: Well I didn’t come up with the inspiration, actually, Ilbijerri did, so [they] had the idea to work on that theme, at that stage we called it ‘The Lost Children’ and they commissioned me to do it. I was someone who had always been aware of my Aboriginal heritage but really didn’t know (and that is why I say Anne is a close character to myself) where I fitted in. This was a fantastic opportunity for me to find out what it meant to be Indigenous and make those connections that I’m still trying to make and find out where I belong because I have this really strong longing to belong in that community. I responded to the ad that Ilbijerri placed and was fortunate enough to get the job of writing. I didn’t know it would take six years.

There have been a lot of tears shed along the way but it’s been a fantastic experience. They very clearly had the idea for a play about this issue; it was meant to be purely for an Indigenous audience. It was an opportunity to have Indigenous people write, research, act, direct and it was meant to be presented to the Indigenous community. It was just a lot further along the track when Playbox Theatre Centre heard about it and took it on board and it was right for it to reach a wider audience without (I hope) losing the Koorie audience because they are still the most important for us.

M: Absolutely. Were you surprised at how successful it has been?

J: Absolutely blown over really! Because, I suppose, it did take so long, and there were a lot of hiccups along the way, hiccups with funding and
workshops — and Ilbijerri were in the position where they had no full time staff, no artistic director, part time admin people. People were doing their full-time job and then rolling up for committee meetings and so it was difficult to maintain the energy and keep those submissions going in and write the stuff that funding bodies wanted to hear. So it really did take a long time. I remember them saying to me, ‘Oh next year we’ll do it, we’ll get the funding for it next year’. So it was like, ‘Oh yeah’.

I suppose if I’d known it was going to have this much impact I might have put more energy into it but I might have been scared off completely from doing it. It was a very daunting project. I felt a huge burden of responsibility to the people I was representing. It was very important for all of us that the community would feel it was their play, and the best praise the play’s had, people will come up to me and say, ‘You got that right, that’s my story, I can identify with a bit of it’.

M: Having seen the play myself, it was, from my perspective (being part of the audience) and being part of the community, an extremely powerful thing. It had an impact on you in the theatre itself, but it had an ongoing impact for weeks. You were still thinking about things that had happened and sounds that were there and various characters and the imagery that was there that you were focussed on. But it was like there was a second play in the back of your head that was there… one instance that I didn’t recognise at first was the bed, when Jimmy was lying on the bed, how it represented the bars in the prison and it took me a while to think about what the doll represented with Ruby. So it was all those things, it wasn’t a play that you saw and went away from.

J: I hope not, a lot of the credit for that should be given to Wesley (Wesley Enoch, Director) and the cast coming up with those visual images and those powerful things. For me personally I find the most powerful part in the play is when the actors tell their story at the end and that’s something that Wesley and the crew and the cast came up with. I joke that the play is almost like a prelude to that part because that, to me, is when it really hits the audience. This isn’t something that happened in the past, happened a long time ago, this is now and the effects of it are now.

M: Well I think the imagery that they used at that last bit, when they stepped into the light, showed that there is a light at the end of the tunnel even though I’ve been in this huge vacuum of all this emotion, really excellent.
I've heard that you've got another exciting play that you are writing at the moment. Tell me what that is?

J: ‘On The Park Bench’, I've been working on that for a couple of years. Gee I'm a mad person because I had this simple idea, having lived in St Kilda, in the days before it was trendy, you know you'd see the old blackfellas on the corner in their little park, outside the toilets and then there'd be the various other street people.

I just had this idea of writing a play about two derelicts on a park bench, one Jewish (a holocaust survivor), and a Koorie fella and the play basically talks about episodes in their lives that got them from the person on the brink of adulthood, with all their hopes and dreams and whatever in their life, to the point where they are the dregs of humanity — I'm not saying they are — but that's how they are perceived to be, people who are dislocated, people on the fringe, people that no-one cares about. They don't have anyone to love or be loved by. So that's what the play is about basically.

...The play still needs work — I've worked on it for two years. There's still a long way to go. It's quite daunting when you think that you've spent three, four...I've heard of many plays taking up to ten years to get from ideas to this stage, and I suppose that many don't even get to this stage. It certainly is a lot of work...
Stolen: A Performance History

The Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative commissioned Jane Harrison to write a play about the Stolen Generations in 1992. Stolen's first season was a joint production in Melbourne by Ilbijerri and the Playbox Theatre in March 1997, and another joint production ran as part of the 1998 Melbourne Festival, gaining widespread acclaim.

The return season ran for five weeks in 1999 and also toured regional Victoria. In 2000 the Ilbijerri-Playbox production of Stolen was staged in Adelaide, Sydney and Tasmania. Throughout these performances, director Wesley Enoch found the audiences' responses to be emotionally intense:

> It is hard having to live through these stories night after night, to see Aboriginal people, and also white people, sitting in the audience absolutely in tears.¹

Stolen travelled to London as part of the HeadsUp: Australian Arts 100 festival in July 2001. Its success at this time led to a return season in London, and five other regional areas in England, in 2001. Stolen has played a significant role in making the experiences of the Stolen Generations more widely known in Australia, and also overseas.

The Stolen Generation: A Brief History

The removal of Aboriginal children from their families began in the 1800s, and was carried out most systematically between 1910 and 1970. It occurred in tandem with the assimilation policy, officially adopted from 1937, and it often combined the resources and ideologies of governments and churches. The intention was for Aboriginal culture and identity to disappear. Thus Aboriginal children, especially children of mixed-race parentage, were brought up as white members of society and denied contact with their Aboriginal culture and families.

Why the Stolen Generation?

The term ‘Stolen Generations’ came into widespread use in the early 1980s. In 1981 the non-Aboriginal historian Peter Read was asked to write a

¹ Cited by Penelope Debelle, ‘Denial fails to steal play’s message’, The Age, 4 April 2000, p.7.