



# Nulungu

Centre for Indigenous Studies

The University of Notre Dame Australia

**2009 lecture**

**Til The Black Lady Sings in company**

**By Deborah Cheetham**

Thank you. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that we gathered on Yaru land. I would like to pay my respects to the Yaru elders both past and present and thank them accepting and welcoming me to their beautiful country.

Tonight I want to talk to you about closing the OTHER gap....

And that is the gap of knowledge of Indigenous culture that still exists for many non-indigenous Australians. Close that gap and then we will really start to see a change.

I believe that if you change expectations you change outcomes.

I can't remember a time when singing wasn't a part of my life.

The earliest memory I have is of me leaning up against my mother in church. It's the evening service and I am probably wearing my pyjamas. Fortunately I am young enough to get away with this outrageous fashion statement. She is singing a hymn and if I close my eyes I can almost hear her voice. "Jesus is calling the wanderers yet, why do they roam? Love only waits to forgive and forget home weary wanderers, home. And so

long before I found my own voice singing became a central part of my life.

But why OPERA?

Well it's quite simple. I fell in love with opera when I was just 14 years of age. It was the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 1979. I sat in the concert hall of the Sydney Opera House row L, seat 23 and Dame Joan Sutherland sang as she waltz into my life as the Merry Widow and I knew right then I wanted to do THAT!

The journey I've taken to be here with you tonight has not always been along the elite and narrow path of the Classical Singer.

My ancestors come from the once rich, green land of the Yorta Yorta Nation, embracing both sides of the Murray River 250 kilometres north of Melbourne. We call the Murray - Dhungala and it has been home to the Yorta Yorta people for more than 60 thousand years.

My grandfather James Little came to Yorta Yorta country from Wallaga Lake in the early 1930's and married a local girl. Her name was Frances McGee.

Together they had 7 children the youngest, Monica, is my mother, Colin, Betty, Freddie, Ernest, Madeline and the eldest Jimmy are my uncles and aunties.

It has taken me over 40 years to gather this knowledge because in 1964, at just three weeks of age I was taken from my mother Monica and given to a family from Sydney, a White-Baptist family, from Sydney. So you see the voice that I can recall from my childhood was that of my adopted

mother, nursing me in church. But all my life voices of my ancestors have been calling to me from the banks of the Dhungala. It's just that for almost 40 years I couldn't hear them.

The journey back to the home of my ancestors from White Baptist Abba Fan to gay Koori Opera Singer has been such a long one at times I felt I would never get there. I had to close the gap in my own knowledge.

It was years before I had the nerve to come out, as an opera singer that is. I used to think 'Well who would ever consider a black Madame Butterfly?' anyway I didn't really seem to fit the build, short, black and weighing under 55 kilos – well it was some time ago – I kept my dreams to myself until one night at the opera in Sydney I heard and saw African American soprano Leona Mitchell sing the role of Tosca. Now that moment changed my life.

Still there wasn't an indigenous role model – well not one that I knew of – I hadn't heard of the great Queensland tenor Harold Blair at that stage and still there was no aboriginal soprano to look up to. Secretly I think my white Baptist family were rather hoping that I would model myself a little more on Yvonne Goolagong than Yvonne Kenny.

For the past 20 years I've pursued my career as a freelance classical soprano. It is a long journey full of challenges and rewards. But in all that time I've been the only indigenous classically trained soprano making a living from this profession. Now that doesn't make any sense to me.

When you define opera, it's really little more than the telling of stories through song and dance, costume and makeup. Indigenous Australians have been doing that for about 60,000 years so it doesn't make any sense to me why

there shouldn't be more aboriginal opera singers. We're built to sing acoustically. We've been doing it in the desert and the forest and alongside the river for thousands and thousands of years.

What if Australian Indigenous voices became the new sound in opera around the world?

What if there was a way to encourage young Indigenous singers and musicians to tell their stories through the medium of opera?

These questions weighed on me for a long time. So in July 2007 I began a project designed to address the under-representation of indigenous Australians in the world of classical vocal music. I decided that I would write an opera that would demand an indigenous cast; working on the principle that if I build it they will come. And they have.

Since mid 2007 The Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development has assisted me in developing a National Talent Identification program, which is designed to identify indigenous talent in areas of the performing arts where we are underrepresented.

This Talent Identification program leads directly into Australia's first Intensive training course for Indigenous singers wishing to pursue a career in the world of opera.

Developing a career in opera is a long slow process. It is an elite pursuit. It is a demanding and all consuming profession with many, many layers of knowledge to acquire before the career can begin in a meaningful way. These points in themselves are NOT reason enough to prevent Indigenous

men and women from taking this path. But the he weight of expectation could be.

It is my goal to change that expectation.

Australian Indigenous voices can and will became the new sound in opera around the world

I have and will continue to encourage young Indigenous singers and musicians to tell their stories through the medium of opera. It is happening already. Indigenous opera is coming and cannot be stopped.

I have encountered some amazing people on my journey towards creating Australia's first Indigenous opera. Amazing people with beautiful voices, voice that have gone unheard, lost to Australia and in some cases the world.

In just 12 months I have found my entire lead cast.

The opera is called 'Pecan Summer' and it revolves around the central character Alice who witnesses the walk-off from Cummeragunja Mission in 1939.

I chose the story of the Cummeragunja walk-off for its obvious dramatic content. The land had been taken, the wages were taken, the children were taken, but more than 150 men and women of the Yorta Yorta Nation would not allow their dignity to be taken; the exodus of Yorta Yorta

people from their homeland and the inevitable and unending search for identity are of an epic scale perfectly suited and deserving of an opera.

You know - I say that I chose this story but in truth, it actually chose me.

Less than a month into the process of researching the story I made a startling discovery. The Aboriginal Grandparents I never knew were actually took part in the walk off and were well known to the elderly people I was interviewing. Suddenly I had a family that stretched beyond the limitations of my knowledge. I had a chance to close the gap. And people were telling me how much I reminded them of my Grandmother Francis and how she has been a singer with a beautiful voice known to one and all. Suddenly I had a past that linked up with my present and my future and I just happened to be writing an opera about it, what are the chances?!!

The walk-off became a march that would lead directly to the 1967 referendum which, in time, rather more slowly than we'd hoped, lead to that the APOLOGY to the stolen generations on 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2008.

In the lead up to the apology many Australians asked themselves what would this actually mean, for themselves, for Aboriginal Australians in general and for the members of the Stolen generations. Would the symbolism of this apology have any lasting affect, would it bring about any real and meaningful change to the lives of those most affected? Well I can tell you what it meant to me. To have the truth of ones existence recognised is no small thing. It was no small thing to me.

This scene now forms the final act of Pecan Summer, which will have it's premier in Melbourne in October 2010.

Every child is born is a blank cheque. If we can continue to change non-indigenous Australia's perceptions and expectations of what Indigenous achievement looks like. If we can grow the knowledge and understanding of our cultures and our capabilities in the broader Australian community, then and only then can we ever hope to close the gap of expectation.

One thing is for sure. I will not give up and it certainly won't be over until the black lady sings IN COMPANY.

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