

THE ABORIGINAL CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS AND QUEENSLAND PERFORMING ARTS CENTRE PRESENT

UP THE LADDER

WESLEY ENOCH
DIRECTOR

ROGER BENNETT
PLAYWRIGHT

Education Resources

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

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ABOUT THE PLAY

CONVENTION: INDIGENOUS THEATRE

THEMES

- Social justice
- Independence and self-worth
- Relationships
- Family
- Freedom

PERFORMANCE & DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

- Offstage character and action
- Ensemble and large cast/chorus work
- Physical performance
- Direct address to audience
- Collage Drama
- Music and Dance

Up the Ladder is suitable for students of Drama, English, Studies of Society (SOSE) and Modern History. It deals with many issues faced by young men, particularly Indigenous men, returning from war. It also looks at the history of Australia through the community culture of boxing tents. The play is a dynamic and lively portrayal of not only the sights and sounds, but the undercurrents that ran through these young men's lives.

A NOTE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING OUR STORIES

BY LYDIA FAIRHALL, ASSOCIATE PRODUCER QPAC.

Hello, My name is Lydia Fairhall. My family comes from Karuah and we are descendants of the Worimi, Guringai people. I grew up on Kabi Kabi country and have spent much of my life living in remote and urban communities, working with Anangu, Noongar, Koori and Murri people within a variety of roles within the arts, education, social work and community development sectors.

For a long time, art has often been the only voice for our people. We are extremely blessed here at QPAC to provide a venue for productions that in essence are a celebration of two unique but unified worlds; the cutting edge contemporary and the time honoured rituals and customs of the traditional.

In 2012, we are again showcasing the exceptional talents of the students of the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts in Roger Bennett's *Up the Ladder*. QPAC's long term relationship with ACPA has brought some of the countries' finest emerging artists together with notable directors and creatives such as Leah Purcell and Gina Rings. This year distinguished director and playwright Wesley Enoch (Artistic Director, Queensland Theatre Company) joins the fold to breathe life into this funny and fiery story of Australia's post war travelling boxing tents.

As we continue to share our stories, knowledge and culture with younger artists and new audiences, we recognise the arts as a powerful tool in engaging with the wider aspirations of our people. *Up the Ladder* provides audiences with an opportunity to engage in layer upon layer of the embedded Aboriginal perspective. From directors, actors, singers, musicians, teachers, dancers, producers and playwrights, the ecology of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing arts is moving from strength to strength. It is an honour to invite you to share our journey of heart ache, humour and healing with productions such as *Up the Ladder*.

Ekuba,
Lydia



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

ROGER BENNETT

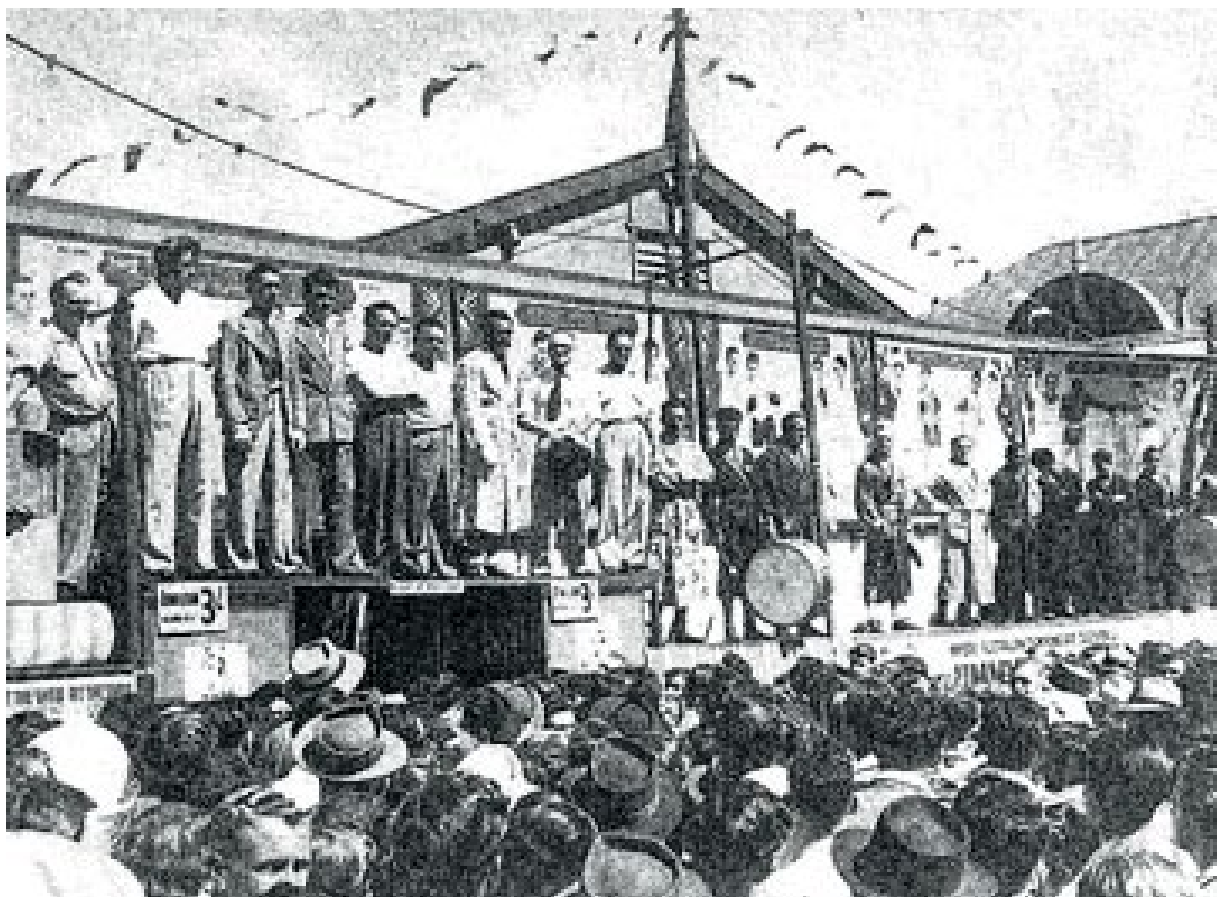
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Bennett

Roger Bennett (1948 – 1997) was an Arrernte man from Central Australia, an actor, and a playwright. His best known works are *Up the Ladder* and *Funerals and Circuses*. They dealt with his life experiences, particularly the travelling boxing tents, where his father, Elley Bennett, was a boxing champion during the 1940s and '50s.

Up the Ladder was first performed at the Adelaide Fringe Festival in 1990, in a production directed by Bob Maza. The play subsequently moved to Melbourne in 1995, for a long stint at the Melbourne Workers Theatre and then Sydney in 1997 for the Festival of the Dreaming. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Up the Ladder* takes the audience right inside the spangled, sweaty, tatty and deceptive world of the travelling sideshow carnival, from tawdry fake snake charmers to the sawdust of the boxing ring. Co-Director of the 1997 production in Sydney Wesley Enoch says the Aboriginal culture comes through in the play's physicality, mocking humour and the sparse nature of the dialogue. Critics have hailed it as a 'feel-good show', 'full of fun and good humour'.

The fact that the play emphasizes positive aspects of the Aboriginal experience in travelling shows led at least one reviewer to criticise it as apolitical. Wesley Enoch, however argues that any play about Aboriginal people is political, 'stating that having black people on stage punching the life out of each other is political. But this is not agit prop. I think we are entering into a phase – culturally, artistically, and politically – where it is actually about the nuance of racism'.

In 2003, the play travelled to Tokyo. Staged by the Rakutendan Theatre Company and directed by Enoch (Ilbjerri Theatre Cooperative), the play used many Japanese actors. In *Funerals and Circuses*, first performed at the Adelaide Festival in 1992, Bennett dealt with issues of racism and inter-racial relationships in a small, racially tense town in South Australia. The music of Paul Kelly was used in this production. Bennett was an actor as well as a playwright. He served as writer in residence at the Araluen Centre for Arts and Entertainment in Alice Springs and at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute in Adelaide.



AT THE THEATRE

We'd like to welcome you to the experience of attending a live performance – while we know you get all the etiquette stuff, here's a reminder of some simple information you can pass on to your students.

We ask you to get involved in the performances by applauding and laughing at appropriate moments. If you have a question – ask your teacher at the interval/end of the show or one of the cast, if you have a chance for a Question & Answer session.

Food or drink is not permitted in the theatre

Live theatre is different to TV – the actors on stage can hear and see you and there are other members of the audience to think about. If you need to leave the performance for any reason, please ensure this is done quickly and quietly and at an appropriate break in the action

Switching your phone to silent isn't the only thing to do. Please ensure that you switch off your mobile phone and leave it in your bag before the performance begins. The glow of the screen is obvious to others and is very distracting!

The play is centered on the world of Tent Boxing and Tent Boxing Sideshows. Australia has a rich history of the sport and Queensland hosts one of the only remaining sideshow, Fred Brophy's. Starting in the late 19th century boxing troupes of professional fighters would travel the mining towns and outback of the country, following fairs and carnivals, putting up big top tents and taking on all-comers for cash in the ring.

Among the more famous of tent boxing troupes, are Roy Bell's and Jimmy Sharman's. Only two tents still travel today, Fred Brophy's, who owns the Cracow Hotel in Cracow, Queensland, still travels with his troupe across Queensland with his wife, Sandi, and son, Fred Brophy Jr. Blue Ribbons Boxing owned by Aubrey Ribbons Jr., Aubrey and his partner Angela Foster (both 6th generation Showmen) are the only boxing tent to travel outside of Queensland or the Northern Territory, making their way through New South Wales and Tasmania.

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE PLAY

At the ABC website, you can watch a short series of videos about the history of the Tent Boxing sideshows. Follow the link:
<http://www.abc.net.au/queensland/boxingtent/>

Fred Brophy insists he will continue travelling with his tent boxing troupe, until he dies, even though the sport was banned in New South Wales, Victoria, West Australia and South Australia in 1971 by the government, due to health concerns.

Many young Indigenous men could find acceptance as fighters in these tents, and some famous Indigenous boxing legends like Kid Young, Jack Hassen and Dave Sands, found their trade in the travelling shows and bouts.

SUGGESTED READING AND RESEARCH

Below are some articles, links and short pieces of information, which would be useful to read and share before the show, or as follow up research for a Responding task.

HELPFUL VIDEO LINKS

Outback Tent Boxing <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsTtB-IHKHU>

Article: Fred Brophy's Tent Boxing <http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/how-i-started-ladies-day-at-fred-brophys-boxing-tent/>

Message Stick program about Indigenous Tent Boxers <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s575115.htm>

ABC Programs: Aboriginal Studies <http://www.abccommercial.com/librariansales/learning-areas/aboriginal-studies?page=3>

Outback tent Boxing Series – End of an Era <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4LQysWei3Q>

Article: Boxing, History and Social Change <http://belshaw.blogspot.com.au/2011/08/boxing-history-social-change.html>

Colonial History Article: Colonialism on display: Indigenous people and artefacts at an Australian agricultural show
<http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ch0354.pdf>



ARTICLE:

GOING 'UP THE LADDER' WITH RAKUTENDAN

BY PETER ECKERSALL, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

How do art works from one culture, speak to another? Global commodities are now part of our everyday routine, yet even their meanings and uses are negotiated within the local community. At the same time, countering globalisation, or in fact very much a process of it, we see the effectiveness of regional and local cultural practices in speaking about our unique histories and sense of self. But how can these forms develop beyond the parochial and also participate in wider conversations, even recuperate the simple act of human communication? The recent Tokyo production of Roger Bennett's Aboriginal tent-boxer play, *Up the Ladder* was a fascinating insight into thinking about these questions from Australian and Japanese perspectives.

Tent boxing was part of Australia's rural history and perhaps an unlikely topic for Japanese audiences. A group of house-boxers — many of them Aboriginal — travelled the outback, taking on any-and-all who came their way. As Bennett's play shows, tent boxing was a kind of vaudeville, and for the lucky few who made the leap to fighting in the major league, it could mean fame and fortune. The bloody world of boxing in Australia, however, is also one in which Aboriginal bodies were often exploited; their health and vitality destroyed. The pummeling of Aboriginals might be read as symbolically reinforcing a national policy that punished and destroyed the black body through the effects of disease, massacre, exploitation, and assimilation. Not that Bennett's play is so didactic though; Bennett takes great pride in the sporting achievements of his Aboriginal characters and delights in the spectacle of bodies in action. The play is also about human relations and the tensions and sacrifices that are made in achieving ones goals. An important message in Bennett's play—represented in this production by the traditional-style dancing of Kirk Page—is how people learn to become proud of who they are and where they're from; that in facing challenges we can draw on the spirits residing inside community and in the memories of the collective achievements of the past. Of course, this is all part of Australia's story and everyone involved wondered how this production would connect with Japanese people.

Translated by Australian theatre specialist, Sawada Keiji and performed by Wada Yoshio's Rakutendan Theatre, *Up the Ladder* featured, in addition to the young Japanese cast, the participation of Page and Ainu composer, Ikabe Futoshi. In the intimate setting of Theatre Kaze, Wada's production recreated the era of the tent show including the spruiking, lurid canvas-paintings, sideshows and, of course, boxing.

At a post-show talk, Sawada, Page, Ikabe, and theatre director Wesley Enoch—who directed *Up the Ladder* in Sydney and was last seen in Japan with his production of Jane Harrison's *Stolen*—were invited to reflect on some of the questions raised by this remarkable and unusual production. In the audience were Japanese theatre critics, producers, and theatregoers who offered comments as well. In chairing the session, I asked speakers about their experiences of the show.

Sawada Keiji, who has translated many Australian plays, talked about the challenges that confront the translator of such culturally specific work. Having a deep understanding of the historical and present-day contexts for Aboriginal theatre is, Sawada argued, necessary for the task to be at all successful. Moreover, good theatre offers audiences a satisfyingly rich assortment of interpretive possibilities. While *Up the Ladder* affords people insight into Australia's cultural history, perhaps more importantly, it is the potential to inspire discussions about Japan's history of Indigenous movements that the production aimed to explore. Thus, the performance showed processes of negotiation not only between Australian and Japanese artists, but pointed to the creative capacity of such interactions to be developed within Japan's cultural space. With several experiments underway, intercultural theatre is a popular topic in Japan, Rakutendan's production has been the sole example of a company working with Indigenous issues though. Kirk Page spoke about working alongside Japanese colleagues, an experience he described as disorienting, yet rewarding. Page's participation was demanding. Coming from Australian theatre, with no Japanese language skills, Page needed to quickly adapt to a different creative context. For their part, Rakutendan had to understand Page's history as a performer and develop ways of working inclusive of his participation. In the end, Page commented that the experience had 'changed his life.' His contribution was crucial to the performance and audiences responded to his powerful presence.

These experiences show how intercultural politics are highlighted in cultural exchange projects such as this one. In light of this, Wesley Enoch spoke about the place of Aboriginal theatre in Australia, a theatre that gives witness to Aboriginal experience. Enoch discussed the history of Aboriginal people and how theatre strengthens their sense of culture and identity. Enoch's interest in the production, and on future collaborations with Japanese artists which he also discussed during his visit, is predicated on this turn: through processes of coming together, we can share in the experiences of other people and learn about ourselves.

Ikabe Futoshi also spoke about the experience of self-discovery and community in the arts. In inviting Ainu participation, the project not only gave space to the richness of Ainu music, but also extended the collaborative theme as a whole. One begins to see how Indigenous peoples share common experiences of colonisation, and how art has become a way of transmitting culture to future generations.

Discussion also touched on processes of performance between cultures. As is well known, Aboriginals in Australia's cultural and sporting life have been a source of community pride and they are torchbearers for the reconciliation process. Performances like *Up the Ladder* not only recount history, but also are a form of witness to Aboriginal presence. In this production though, the physical connection to the living history of these stories has been broken by the play's journey to Japan – one cannot simply 'act' Indigenous. What we see instead is a different set of possibilities for the play.

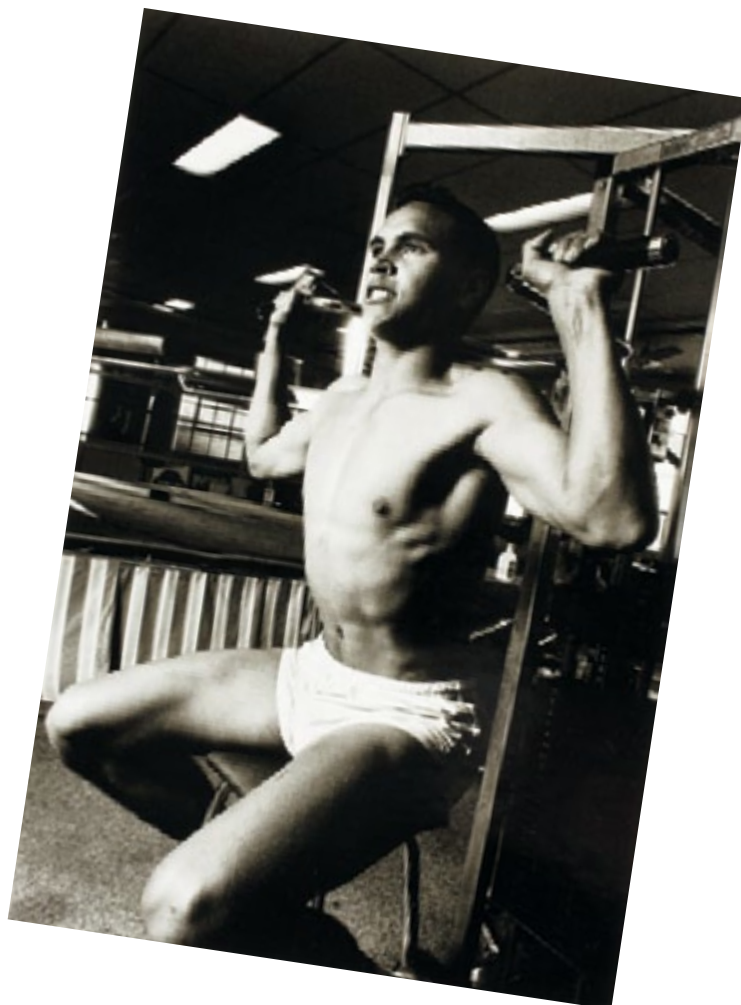
Rakutendan's production of *Up the Ladder* introduced Japanese audiences to more complex images of Australia than is normal in Japan, also to local Indigenous participation. But the collaborative process, where people with unique cultural experiences work together on a collective vision, might prove to be the most valuable aspect of this work in the long term. Everyone was talking about the performance and what the next one might be as well.

Perhaps then, *Up the Ladder*, and projects like it, give insight into how conversations between cultures happen; how art forms, grown from the unique experiences of communities, can reach out to others. Sometimes of course, this is a difficult experience; in this instance, the opposite seems to be true. Whatever the outcome, the conversation needs to continue. Such conversations can only happen when we preserve and value the diversity of voices with which we speak.

ARTICLE: THE BLOOD AND SWEATDRENCHED CANVAS

BY ERIC CLARKE, RMIT.

<http://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/eserv/rmit:9287/Clarke.pdf>



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES AND ASSESSMENT OPPORTUNITIES

RESPONDING: ANALYTICAL ESSAY

**“Maybe in the time to come when we are dead and buried
I hope things will be different...” – Johnny**

After seeing ACPA's production of *Up the Ladder*, reading and researching from these Education Resources, students can write an analytical essay that discusses this quote in relation to their experience of the production as an audience member. Does the play provide us with the belief that things will be different in the future? Is the message a positive or a negative one? If this is the central dramatic question to the work, then has the production answered it?

Students can identify and evaluate the reoccurring themes in *Up the Ladder* and discuss how this was conveyed by the work on stage:

- Discuss why it might be important to 'throw away' or manipulate the conventional structure/styles of theatre when creating new work. Students can also choose to disagree with this statement, ensuring they reinforce their ideas with examples from the production and research.
- Discuss how the play used symbolism and metaphor through the use of props, lighting, music and movement, in order to convey the 'central dramatic question'.
- Ask students to focus on the dramatic elements of space, mood, tension and role to create contrast and dramatic meaning. Students are to identify and discuss dramatic languages throughout the production to reinforce their ideas. E.g. Design (lighting, sound, set and costume).

TASKS – IDEAS FOR CREATING A RESPONDING TASK

If you are responding to the performance, here are some resources that will help students to get writing. Both of these resources can easily be reproduced as handouts for your students.

WRITING A REVIEW – WHERE DO I START?

After watching a performance, you will have quite a strong sense of whether or not it was effective. This is usually reinforced through your feelings of whether or not you were engaged, moved, excited or disinterested in the performance. The following categories and questions may assist students in writing a review.

INTRODUCTION

Include the name of the play you are reviewing, the name of the playwright, the theatre where the performance was held and the date of the performance; if you choose, you may also indicate your overall impression of the play.

PLOT

This is the actual action that happens on stage. Try to reduce the whole story into a brief paragraph that includes all the main events.

DISCUSS THEMES AND ISSUES

Outline the themes and issues that you feel were important in the play. The themes and issues carry the message of the play and are important in helping the audience gain meaning from the performance. You should also discuss your impression of the directorial concept in your review. Comment on the director's interpretation of the play, and how the choice of dramatic form and performance style helps to communicate the play's themes and issues.

ANALYSE CHARACTER OBJECTIVE AND MOTIVATION

Describe and analyse the characters. To find the character's objective, ask yourself the question: What does the character want to achieve by the end of the play? To find the character's motivation, ask yourself the question: Why does the character want to achieve their goal?

EVALUATE THE PERFORMER

(Give examples wherever possible!)

- How well did the actors use body language to express their character?
- Were their movements and gestures appropriate for their character?
- How well did they use their voice to express character and deliver lines?
- How focused did they seem during their performance?
- How convincing did the performer seem in their portrayal of their character?

COMMENT ON THE USE OF THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

Discuss how effective you think the use of sound, lighting, set and costume were in the performance

Were the costumes suitable for the characters? How did the choice of colours and designs suit the overall look of the performance?

Was the set an effective use of space? Was the set easy for the actors to manoeuvre around? In terms of colour and layout, did its design enhance the performance?

How did the elements of production support the directorial concept?

Did the signs and symbols used within the production enhance meaning?

Was special lighting used at any time for a particular effect?

Did the use of live or recorded sound enhance or detract from the performance?

How did lighting and sound establish location and create atmosphere?

CONCLUSION

Sum up the overall success of the play.

Attached below is a Responding to Live Theatre Worksheet. It is a way to get students thinking about their live theatre experience and is broken down into sections so they can plot out their ideas easily and simplistically. It can be the beginnings of a review, an essay response or even a short response exam.

RESPONDING TO LIVE THEATRE WORKSHEET

NAME OF PLAY:

WRITTEN BY:

DIRECTED BY:

ACTORS:

Recommendation:

Why would you recommend this play? Why would it appeal to your target audience?

Narrative:

(Briefly outline the plot in 75 words or less and then evaluate how effectively the play will entertain the audience)

Themes and Issues:

What themes and issues are illuminated in the play? Explain how. What questions are raised for the audience?

Characters:

Why are the characters so engaging? You can elaborate on one character more however you need to address at least 2 of the characters in the play.

Dramatic Tension:

Identify the major tensions in the play that entertain the audience/elaborate on one of the major themes. Analyse two specific examples.
