

50 Years of the Stables
Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

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C O M P A N Y

Episode Four: *First Nations Storytelling*
With **Wesley Enoch** and **Meyne Wyatt**

Two industry greats and Grif-faves, Wesley Enoch and Meyne Wyatt, discuss playwriting, the power of the unfiltered indigenous voice, and the Stables Theatre's role as the national beacon of intimate storytelling.

Hosted by:

AC - Angela Catterns

Guests:

MW - Meyne Wyatt

WE - Wesley Enoch

Angela Catterns: *2020 marks the 50th birthday of Griffin Theatres Company home: the Stables Theatre. I'm Angela Catterns. Join us as we celebrate the anniversary in this special series of podcasts, where we'll hear about the theatre's history and talk to some of the country's most celebrated artists.*

AC: Playwright and theatre director, Wesley Enoch, and actor and playwright, Meyne Wyatt. Welcome both to our podcast celebrating 50 Years of the Stables Theatre.

Wesley Enoch: Thank you very much.

Meyne Wyatt: Thanks for having us.

AC: Let's talk about Wesley's play first, *The Stories of Miracles at Cookie's Table*. Can you explain briefly what that's about?

WE: The story is of Annie, a woman who's come back after the death of her mother, but also her estranged son has come back after the death of his grandmother, who obviously raised him. And there's this whole tension about why Annie abandoned the family, who Nathan's father is and this whole sense of story of the past playing itself out in their present relationship. And in the end, it's really about how they write the future story, what they want the world to be like, that ends the play.

AC: Was that your first play Wesley?

WE: No, no. I had written—in fact it's 25 years since I wrote *The 7 Stages of Grieving* with Deborah Mailman. That was when I was 25. I'm in fact 50 this year as well! So the whole idea - the Stables, me...

AC: Ohhh, that's lovely..

WE: It feels like we both need a little bit of Spakfilla too!

[laughter]

AC: So, you were known as a director first. When did you begin to write for the stage?

WE: It's interesting really, they all came at the same time. Deborah Mailman, Wayne Blair, Leah Purcell, we were all around within about five years of each other hanging around in Brisbane. And we were with a company called Kooemba Jdarra that we all helped set up with Lafe Charlton and Roxanne McDonald and a number of others. In that company we would act, and I was not a very good actor. Don't go laughing Meyne. No, it was not my thing, and I remember as a bunch of actors we were saying, "We need a director, who is going to direct?" And I said, "I'll tell you what to do, come with me." Then we said, "We should write our own material. Let's write it!" It was that thing of, when you don't know what you don't know, you just get in the middle of it and do it. It's not until later that people tell you it's good or not good or how you learnt the way. So, 25 years on, it was one of those things that, my first play basically got my second play, got my third play.

And directing was always another way of writing for me. Like working with brand new plays, the first time you get it onto a stage is like you are writing it into life as a director. You are interpreting what is on the page whether you have written it or not, and the final act of getting it on stage completes the writing because it puts it in front of an audience.

AC: So, let's talk about your play, Meyne, *City of Gold*. It was staged at the Griffin quite recently?

MW: Yes, in August.

AC: And that was your first work as a playwright?

MW: First work writing anything really. So, oh you know, it was always something I wanted to do in my career.

AC: Was it?

MW: I thought it would be something eventual. But then I thought it's now or never, so I started writing in 2017 and then we got it up.

AC: Because you had a successful career as an actor, of course, before then. And so, writing this story, was that something you had to do?

MW: Oh yeah, for sure! I think at the time, this was just off the back of my Dad passing. So, I had gone through the grief of that and then at that point, I was almost, maybe disillusioned with the industry a little bit. Because I was going out for the same work at the time and I thought you know I'm not going to be seen for these particular types of roles and I'm just gonna have to write it. And so, I decided to write the play and then that in turn helped me deal with the grief of losing my Dad. So, it was, you know, knocking these things down all at the same time. So, the process was really a cathartic experience, but also something that I wanted to make sure I was enlightened and enriched my career, I suppose.

AC: When you say you're always out for the same roles, what were they?

MW: It was usually the "angry young man", which is a stereotype that is for a lot of Indigenous male actors. It got me through the door in my first couple of shows, those stories need to be told. But I felt like I'd done that, and I was wanting a new challenge and something new, something fresh.

AC: Wesley, you saw Meyne's play?

WE: It was amazing. I mean, I've said it to him. The structure of it, the ability to get all of... that incredible voice. I saw it at Griffin, people who saw it in Brisbane QT as well-

MW: The Billie Brown Theatre.

WE: The Billie Brown Theatre, a beautiful new space. But people said that because of how tight the Griffin space is, how intimate, how right in front of you it all is. And I think I sat in the front row?

MW: Yeah. [laughs]

WE: I went with an older friend who couldn't kind of get up the stairs. And I sat in the front row and I thought 'they'll cope'. That amazing power, and that monologue that comes in the second act, I think that is the best work I have seen you do, Meyne. It was powerful, it was contemporary, it moved everyone in the audience. And not just because it was so close but because of the situation you'd set up in the first act. I should say right at the very end, if people get a chance to read the play, I was surprised when the final scene happens and the whole play moves like dominos, and it all falls in the opposite direction to the one you thought it was going. And suddenly you feel this rush of story come upon you, I think it was a masterful stroke. And you as an actor, you know, don't ever give up acting, you are brilliant, but your writing was so insightful. It was amazing to watch.

AC: Does that mean much coming from Wesley, all that flattery?

MW: [laughing] It was very flattering, thank you, thank you for those kind words. I think, obviously Wesley has been in the industry for so long and he has allowed so many -

WE: Did you just call me old?

[laughter]

MW: Yeah, you said 50 years!

AC: You just told us!

MW: You know, like Wesley said, and other Indigenous practitioners have opened doors for younger creatives like myself to come through. So those barriers you know, the steps that come through every time another new creative comes along. You know. So, you always pay homage but you also wanna do something different too.

AC: So, the *City of Gold* is Kalgoorlie, where you grew up?

MW: Yes, so I wanted to make sure that I was representing, you know, where I'm from. Because it was particular voice that needed to be told, but also, it's specific to a region, ideas and things coming out of there that needed to be realised on this side of the country. I think there's a problem, a systemic problem with racism there, so I wanted to talk about that in the play.

AC: How much of the play is your story, Meyne?

MW: Um, oh look, it's about an actor who lives in Sydney, who comes home to Kalgoorlie and his Dad's just passed away. So, I drew a lot from my own personal experiences, but you know there is enough there to make it feel like... you know, who says my story is interesting? I made sure I put a

little sugar on top, to sweeten the deal. But you know, there's other things in there, just so I had a bit of artistic licence.

WE: It's that interesting thing that most Indigenous writers, there's a perception that we can only write biographical or autobiographical material. And that even if you are drawing on your own life, there is a creative act to that. There is no way you can tell the truth half the time because, the truth is either too complex or too hurtful, so you find these creative layers. But it's interesting, *Cookie's Table* that we talked about before, because I set it on an island and my family, we come from Stradbroke Island, they said it was all about you and I was going, "No. No. Well, inasmuch as every character is me, every character speaks with my voice, because that is the nature of writing." But this pigeonhole that people want to put indigenous writing into, and say that you are *only* capable of telling the authentic story, that's your story.

And I worry because it stops indigenous writers from thinking about huge acts of fantasy or the ability to create these fictional worlds. They think "That's not what they want from you, we want you to only tell the truth because your truth is so powerful." And I like to say that storytelling is all forms of truth. As long as it rings true, it doesn't have to be- "I lived it, or Meyne lived it, therefore it's true and we can prove it in the history books". That sense of saying, of what we are trying to do, is creative narratives that shift people a little more.

AC: And so, was *Cookie's Table* your first connection with the Stables Theatre?

WE: Well, I saw shows there, but my first time as an artist being there. I remember seeing Michael Gow's work, *Live Acts On Stage*, a fascinating work. It was this kind of retelling of Greek mythology and it was again, this intimacy of the space. It was able to, with nothing much on the stage, I think there was one chalk line along the wall, and the actors just created everything in front of you the whole time.

One of the things about that space when you're talking about history, the theatrical history at least in this country, you can pinpoint stages around the country that have been modelled on that corner. Rightly or wrongly. Like Belvoir Street modelled on that corner, the Billie Brown Theatre, modelled on that corner, Octagon in Perth. I mean, you just find all these different—even the old Wharf One, Vivian Fraser worked on that one as well. The sense that the corner is a very unique space in Australia and you can pinpoint it all the way to the Stables and say because when Nimrod was first there, its antecedence, and everyone's kind of goes back to that moment at the starting point for the intimacy of storytelling.

AC: Did you like working in that space too, Meyne?

MW: Yeah. Well, when I graduated from acting school my first two shows were at Griffin. The first shows was *The Brothers Size*, a Griffin Independent, so I was getting paid peanuts for two months work. But the experience of being in that space and that kind of opened the door for me acting-wise and offered me a lot of opportunities from there. And I went straight back-to-back into the Griffin Mainstage with *Silent Disco*, Lachlan Philpott's play. So, Griffin kind of like *birthed* my acting career I suppose, in the professional realm. And I think Sam Strong was the Artistic Director at the time and Lee Lewis was my Director. So, it was funny that it ended up my first play [as a writer], Sam was the Artistic Director at Queensland and Lee was the Artistic Director at Griffin, and they both got me to come back to Griffin. It kind of came full circle with my acting career to my writing career. And the intimacy of that space is an actor's delight, because you get the boundaries of performing—in a bigger space you have hit the person in the back row but in that space, it's so clear and you are

almost on top of the actors, it's almost filmic in a lot of ways. You still have that performance that is larger than life, but it's heightened by that space.

AC: Is it a bit daunting too? You know, is it sometimes a little bit scary?

MW: I mean you are exposed more. You're all warts and everything, so everyone can see every little moment. There is no faking in there, so people know when you are not giving 100%. Obviously, that's not the aim, but you know—there is no hiding in that space. But I have always loved it, and that's what I have always loved about that space. It's that you are right there and at arm's length. Sometimes you are tripping over people's feet.

[Laughter]

AC: Wesley, when did you begin writing and what were your observations at the time of the theatre scene in Australia?

WE: Were talking about the early 90s and I was working mostly with young kids and this notion of 'by telling our stories we write onto the public record the history that was either neglected or denied'. There was a sense that in—after '88 and that whole kind of re-examining of what Australian identity could be, would be, once all that left, the early 90s was a quite fecund time of growth of indigenous voices, First Nations voices. In fact, between '88 and '93, most of the indigenous arts infrastructure we see now jumped into existence. When you think about theatre companies like Yirra Yaakin, ILBIJERRI, Moogahlin was a little later, Boomalli was an art gallery which was slightly just after '87, Bangarra. All of these companies came to existence because I think there was an openness, a need to tell the stories and hear the stories.

And it was interesting to then see by the time you get through to John Howard's time and the Reconciliation movement was almost being stomped on, the voices were already in existence. I think the investment that we saw then, both investment in talent, money investment, is paying off now. Deborah Mailman is just on television right now, fabulous—look at her, she is just eating it all up. She's amazing! But you have also got Darren Dale behind the scenes and Rachel Perkins as the director and you start to realise that we've got more depth. There may have been, I'd say, in the 80s this ceiling that lots of people hit and couldn't get beyond. You know: Lydia Miller, Rhoda Roberts, who were as performers incredibly powerful, hit the ceiling and then found that there was no next opportunity and they found opportunities in different ways. I think in about ten years' time, when Deborah's in her early 50s, Rachael Maza will be in her late 50s, Ursula Yovich will be of age, Irma Woods, I mean there will be huge numbers of people, with multiple generations.

And what I loved about watching Meyne's work is, not just that he is an incredible leader in terms of as an artist, but his ability, his fearlessness, to just go in there and take things by the throat, give it a bit of shake. And then not to take it so personally, to sit back and go 'See what I can do? Look at that'. The skills are amazing, I reckon in the next 20 to 30 years, we will have people in their seventies and their eighties who will have had continuous work throughout their career, which not many people have done.

AC: Do you agree Meyne?

MW: I do agree, I think every generation has a voice and it's always backed up from the one before. What I tried to come through, I wanted to make sure there was something different and a change. And Griffin has allowed me to have that platform. Because when I started writing the show, I made sure that this was gonna go the way I wanted it to, I didn't want a filtered voice and if it did [have that

happen to it] it could sit on the shelf, I didn't care. It could gain dust because that wasn't the aim. The fact that I got to do it and perform it was the cherry on top, but the fact that I wrote it and I got two major theatre companies—that was my aim and I was successful in that. And I got to act in it and perform it in front of people, and then it becomes another conversation in the Australian and indigenous lexicon I suppose. It's another voice amongst all those other voices, you know. It's the first show and hopefully won't be the last. We will keep going, to make sure those voices continue.

AC: And what was the audience's reaction like?

MW: Look, it was very different. Because of the intimacy of the space and you are right there, that when you got to the end of the show there was a lot of silence. You go down to the foyer afterwards and people would be congratulating you and giving you lovely things to say. But there was also a moment of pause. I could see that it affected people, in a positive way, but it was also informative in ways that I think that... it hadn't hit that way in maybe a while.

WE: It was very interesting, at the end of the play, as I said, the final scene reorders the whole understanding of the play for you. I remember, I gave a standing ovation, I think I was the only one standing at the time because everyone was a bit shell-shocked. I remember thinking, "You are never going to get a second or third call out of this," because everyone is still in the moment, reeling from it. I think audiences by their very nature [are] inarticulate about what they have just felt, and it will take a day, or a week. It's the kind of play, *City of Gold*, that will just stay with people forever and they will remember this particular moment.

The issue for me is that the number of indigenous writers who have written one play, you know 30, 40, there's heaps of them. The people who have written a second or third play, you can count on one hand and what we need to do is not just to encourage the writers through beautiful intimate experiences like *City of Gold* but also the indigenous dramaturgy. Isaac Drandic, the director of *City of Gold*, who is just fabulous, he's got that kind of insight. The ability to say as a First Nations person, "These are the through lines, these are the dramaturgical things we want to follow". And what I think this gives an audience, we were talking about authenticity before, it gives the sense, this little shock, this little kind of 'jolt' out of the complacency of their world view. And they realise they are watching an indigenous theatre piece and there has been this ongoing discussion of who owns the title 'indigenous theatre', if you have a non-indigenous writer but an indigenous director. All this *Secret River* conversation that goes round and round, and often the discussion is more valuable than any kind of position. And this wonderful thing of saying *City of Gold*—for me, is where you felt that this jolt, and you realise what it is when it's in front you, because it's *uncompromisingly familiar* to every black fella in the house, and the shock of the new to almost every white fella.

AC: Mm, wow. Are you writing anything else at the moment Meyne?

MW: I might be in the process of writing something at the moment. We'll see.

AC: You might be...

[laughter]

MW: Until it's announced, until I'm there performing on opening night. Then I'll know it's signed, sealed and delivered. I'm that type of person, when you're an actor you can't afford to hold onto things when people go, "We're gonna do this". You don't know until you are there.

WE: Do you think you'll only ever—when you write something, you only ever write for yourself to act in it?

MW: Yeah pretty much, um.

WE: Make your own work!

[laughter]

MW: Well I think there is a particular voice in the way my writing is. I want things to be said, want the intention to be there and I think that's what I wanted to do in the first play and this next one, that I "could" be writing, there is a certain voice that I want to articulate as well. But also, I want something fresh and something new as well and I wanna see other people say what I've got written and their interpretation, which is the fun part of putting it together, especially your own writing, is hearing other people say it. And going "Oh yeah, I never thought about it like that" when they say the line differently or they interpret it differently.

WE: I find it interesting though, there is a real hunger for indigenous stories and the development time, they just keep trying to pull things out. You go "Where is the two years of development? Where is the thoughtfulness around that?" The danger I reckon is that people's need outstrips our ability to write it in a thoughtful way that's right for us. I look at Nakkiah Lui, who is a fabulous writer and you could just go 'things need time'. But because the need is so great in Australia, when there is great talent like Meyne out there they grab hold and say "Come on, more, more, more, more, more, more!" When do you say, "Under *these* circumstances, and *this* timeline is best for us?"

AC: So, Wesley is Artistic Director of Sydney Festival.

WE: Oh, that's right I do, do that.

AC: Do you even have time to write anymore?

WE: I have been writing the same play for eight years!

AC: [Laughing]

WE: It's outrageous!

AC: When might we see that?

WE: Ah look, I finish at the Sydney Festival in February 2021, and it's interesting because I have spent 10 years now in charge of these big mainstream organisations—the Queensland Theatre Company, and then the Sydney Festival. After ten years of doing that, great skills, great opportunities, I'm not being too nasty about it, but I actually think all I have been doing is shoehorning into all those organisations the things I think are important. Bringing our voices to the mainstream and all that kind of stuff and getting those resources to play with.

And what I want, I turn 50 and I think the next 10 years of my life where I've got this high energy, I think it's about doing the things that I think are important as central, not just kind-of- so. I don't know how that will manifest, but writing is one of those things, supporting others is another way, maybe directing some more, but I don't know. There comes a time where the world says to you- "You're past it, you're gone, and you have transition into being an elder, a supporter." I'm not there yet-

MW: [small laugh]

WE: Don't laugh too much! But you know that moment when the world says, "Okay now you transition, now you're an elder".

AC: And so, we talk a lot about diversity in theatre. Am I right in saying you have become a board member of the Griffin, Meyne? Is that right?

MW: I have, that's right, yes.

AC: Congratulations, I think that's fantastic. So, what kind of change would like to see in Australian theatre in general?

MW: I think diversity is a big component in that, and hearing voices from diverse backgrounds. I feel like, every major theatre company has started to move in that direction. But I still don't think it's enough, I think there's not enough risk. I feel like I see a Shakespeare up every year again, again and again. I feel like I'm hearing and seeing the same people, a lot. So, look I'm trying to be optimistic about it because, you know, because you want those positive outcomes, but I think there still there needs to be more and more.

You'll see work that are is not in the major theatre companies, that is interesting and thrilling and you are hearing people from Sydney's west, and you are seeing shows that are just a fresh voice of fresh and young people saying things that make you go—there is a generational voice that is opposing to what has come before them, which I think is interesting. It's what I would like to see more of. That's the great thing about being a part of Griffin, is that they're predominantly new Australian work and that's what excites me about the theatre company. And why decided I wanted to push my play there.

AC: Fantastic. What about you Wesley?

WE: Well look, I'm really drawn to some statistics there, that 42% of all Australians are either born overseas or have a parent born overseas but that's not reflected in our theatre so much. In terms of Aboriginal population, almost 50% of the Aboriginal population is under 30, which is an inverted population pyramid when you think about the baby boomers and all that kind of stuff. Which is basically government policy enacted in our lives. Babies living. And that's what we are seeing in the last 30 years and our theatre has to keep in touch with that.

And one of the biggest things, I know at the Australian Council where I sit on the committee there, one of the big issues is that intergenerational transfer of knowledge is so important. Not just from the old to the young, but from the young to the old, or older perhaps. This notion of how we work together and how we stay open to these new voices. What I'm finding incredibly disappointing in the mainstream theatres is that economic kind of rationalism takes over and they become more and more risk averse to the new voices or the challenging voices. And when they do, sometimes, take on a new voice, it's only in the form of comedy or only in the form of farce. You go, "Come on, you've gotta actually stay open to all forms of engagement with an audience" and the aversion to risk is one the things—that's why we are subsidised; we are here to be the storytellers of the clan. And I worry that the large companies don't always engage with that.

AC: And so therefore a small theatre like the Stables is vital.

WE: More than vital. In fact, I think, when I ran the Queensland Theatre Company, you looked to Griffin because you go, “What are they doing, and who can I go down there and get the next play from, or connect up with or those things”. When you think about gender parity, Griffin was always there. When you are thinking about culturally diverse voices, Griffin’s there doing it. When you think about new voices and new work, Griffin’s right in the middle of it. When you are thinking about the historic Australian voice, Griffin’s right there. You look to them because they are the pulse of what’s coming.

AC: That’s fantastic. A pleasure and a delight to speak to you both, thank you so much. Wayn- Meyne and Wesley thank you very much. Or Wayne if you-

WE: Wayne, at last we are a couple. Looking forward to it.

[laughter]

MW: Thank you.

AC: Thanks for listening to Griffin’s special podcast series, where we are celebrating 50 Years of The Stables. For more anniversary activities head to Griffin’s website: griffintheatre.com.au

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*The 50 Years of the Stables podcast series was produced by **Margaret Murphy**, hosted by **Angela Catterns** and recorded & edited by **Diamantina Media Group**.*

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