

# HISTORY

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1929



# Musical a Bran Nue Dae for people of Broome

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**S**ongwriter and performer Naomi Pigram first saw Bran Nue Dae, Australia's first indigenous musical, when it premiered in Perth 30 years ago next month.

Pigram, associate director of the anniversary production of the show that opens in Parramatta tonight, remembers her pride years ago when the Octagon Theatre audience stood and clapped at the end of the performance.

Pigram was aged about 12, and the storm of clapping was for her family — for her dad Stephen, who played in the onstage band Kuckles and was the musical director of the show, for her uncle Jimmy Chi, who wrote Bran Nue Dae, and for many other family members who performed on stage.

They were all from the Western Australian coastal town of Broome which had been the musical's cradle.

"To see that story on stage, I mean — that's our life, you know?" Pigram said in the lead-up to the revival's opening performance at Parramatta Riverside Theatres tonight.

"As a kid you're so overwhelmed by it all, to see people cheering for the place you call home and stories that are so familiar to us as Broome people."

Pigram doesn't mean that the plot of Bran Nue Dae is real. She just means that it's based on the essential truths of her childhood. She knew lots of kids like Willie (played in the anniversary production by the accomplished performer Marcus Corowa) who were sent to Catholic boarding school in Perth. They just didn't run away like Willie, who was hoping to be reunited in Broome with his girl Rosie (played by newcomer Teresa Moore).

In the sound and feel of Bran Nue Dae, Pigram recognises the town she loves and the music and people she grew up with.



Performers in the 1990 production; (inset) Naomi Pigram, whose father was the original musical director.



"There's this fusion of music that's really unique to Broome because it was a pearling town and all of those different cultures came there in the early days," Pigram says. "It draws on all the places that the Kuckles come from, for instance Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Malay and of course our Aboriginal heritage."

"The music is one thing that's very significant to us, and then the story of an Aboriginal boy who gets sent down to Perth for schooling. (Bran Nue Dae) is based in the 1960s, but this continued down the generations." Pigram's own brothers went to school in Perth.

Then there was the presence of the Catholic Church, represented in the musical by Father Benedictus (Andrew Moran).

"I grew up going to church every Sunday with my nan," Pigram says.

"She had so many grandchildren. The smell of her perfume and putting on your Sunday's best was something that I grew up with and didn't know any different. It was quite a peaceful place going to church with her, and the singing and all of that."

Today Pigram lives in Broome with her father. She has two adult children, Taj and Tehya Jamieson. Both are performing in Bran Nue Dae. Pigram's brother Bart has taken over as musical director from their father, and their cousin Danielle Sibosado plays Marijuana Annie in Bran Nue Dae. When Broome people return to the town after being away, the first thing they do is take off their shoes and run barefoot through the pindan, the red soil country of the West Kimberly, Pigram says. Then it's off to fishing.

Broome exerts a tremendous pull on Willie, the central character in Bran Nue Dae who runs away from his

Catholic boarding school in Perth. On his rag-tag road trip back home, Willie meets Uncle Tadpole and the pair encounter many adventures. Tadpole was played 30 years ago by Ernie Dingo, who is reprising the role in the current production.

For Pigram, Bran Nue Dae has an enduring message.

"Bran Nue Dae was the first indigenous musical and I think that the messages it carries in terms of inclusivity, and breaking down those barriers and those differences through music and dance, that's the most important thing. I think it just builds relationships, and I think we need a lot more of that."

After Bran Nue Dae's premiere in 1990, as part of the Festival of Perth, the show toured Australia and even featured as part of the Edinburgh Festival.

In 1991 a television documentary about the musical was aired, and in 2010 a film version was directed by Rachel Perkins starring Ernie Dingo, Jessica Mauboy, Missy Higgins, Deborah Mailman, Geoffrey Rush, Magda Szubanski and Dan Sultan.

Back in 1991, after the show's rapturous reception, Jimmy Chi said simply that Bran Nue Dae was "an attempt to get our stuff recognised". Rejected everywhere at first, the show was produced with seedling money from Lord McAlpine.

The anniversary show is a feature of the Sydney Festival. It's also a co-production of Opera Australia, the West Australian Opera, Opera Queensland and State Opera South Australia. The real power, however, still lies in indigenous hands.

"It's just one big family, really," Pigram says.

**Bran Nue Dae opens tonight at Riverside Theatres before touring nationally**

1990



Teresa Moore and Marcus Corowa as Rosie and Willie in the anniversary production; (right) John Moore as Willie in the 1990 production.



## ON THIS DAY

**395** The death of emperor Theodosius I results in the splitting of the Roman empire into east and west under Theodosius's sons Arcadius and Honorius.

**1773** The Resolution and the Adventure, commanded by Captain James Cook on his second voyage of exploration, become the first ships recorded to have crossed the Antarctic Circle.

**1893** Acting for Hawaiian sugar interests and their American allies, a committee led by Sanford Ballard Dole deposes Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani and installs a provisional government with Dole as president.

**1917** The US buys three of the Virgin Islands, St Thomas, St John and St Croix, from Denmark for \$25 million.

**1929** Popeye the Sailor Man, a cartoon character created by Elzie Segar, first appears in the Thimble Theatre comic strip syndicated in the US.

**1961** US president Dwight Eisenhower, in a farewell speech before leaving office, warns of the risks of the growing power of the "military industrial complex".

**1977** Double murderer Gary Gilmore, 36, is executed by firing squad at Utah State Prison, ending a 10-year suspension of capital punishment in the US.

**1997** Clyde Tombaugh, the discoverer of the planet Pluto, dies at 90 in New Mexico.

**2005** Zhao Ziyang, a Chinese reformist toppled as Communist Party chief in 1989 for opposing an army crackdown on the Tiananmen Square democracy protests, dies aged 85.

**2018** A fire breaks out on a bus in Kazakhstan killing 52 workers from Uzbekistan.