

THE AUSTRALIAN

Smelling the winds of injustice

JACK Davis, West Australian playwright and poet recently in Sydney to launch his third volume of poetry *John Pat and Other Poems*, is a writer "at the height of his powers", says his biographer, Keith Chesson.

The biography *Jack Davis - A Life-Story*, also just released, describes how Davis has had to buy a new suit since he was awarded the Order of Australia to collect various honorary doctorates in literature from universities, the Myer Award and the Bicentennial BHP Award for the Pursuit of Excellence.

Yet Davis is the first to confess he was the last to believe he had the necessary characteristics to become a poet and playwright. Neither of his parents could read nor write; when his father died while he was still a boy just out of primary school, he, his four brothers and five sisters were forced to scatter throughout Western Australia in search of work.

This experience, although cause for bitterness, is common to Aborigines. Davis's mother was wrenched from her family and community and exiled into a white family in accordance with government policy of the time.

A former stockman, lay preacher, boxer and horse breaker, Davis at 71 can look back to the times when Aboriginal stockmen were not paid wages but were given a pair of boots, a pair of trousers and rations of bread and mutton - in essence they were slaves to a system of apartheid.

Davis is fully aware of the outrage, the humour, the compassion and the irony. When he talks about Aboriginal people today, he's fond of referring to their sense of *barungin*, which means "to smell the wind" and is also the name of one of his five plays.

"Lots of Aboriginal people today have lost the ability to smell. Before the white person came here, it was important. It was the ability to know where the food, rain and other people were. It meant life. There are so many alien smells today we are in danger of losing our sense to smell out the better things in life. We're finding things attractive which are not conducive to our well-being," he says.

"Today when they smell the wind, Aboriginal people know that the white person has spoilt our environment, our way of life and our culture. It's because we haven't been able to smell the wind properly."

Davis has known his biographer since 1971 when they met at a Perth Aboriginal centre. Drawn to Davis by common interests in Aboriginal affairs and writing, Chesson - painter, violinist, writer and teacher - says he couldn't find any positive syllabus material on urban Aborigines. In his search he approached Davis, at that time editor of the magazines *Aboriginal Islander* and *Identity*. Chesson was encouraged to write Davis's story because although it had been requested by a publisher, Davis felt "too shy" to write it himself.

"Jack started coming round after tea and talking into a tape. He gave me a lot of insights into Aboriginality, traditional and urban," says Chesson, who has since written a collection of short stories, poetry, a children's novel and a play.

Davis is adamant that translating Aboriginal lit-



Jack Davis: 'For God's sake, don't let's say Australia is any better than South Africa . . . white Australia is not' — Picture: ALAN PRYKE

erature, traditionally an oral form, into the written word, does not create a problem but rather contributes to a distinct Aboriginal style.

"Black writers have to make their bread and butter and write in English. We want people to know about us. It would be nice if we could write in our own languages but just because I'm Aboriginal, I don't have to write in one. Today, unfortunately, Aboriginal languages are second to English.

I have had to adapt my own style. In Western Australia we have our own writers association, Australian Writers Oral Literature and Dramatists Association (AWOLDA). Recently a book was published, *Wandering Girl* by Glenyse Ward. It was so simplified we were going to change it, but finally we didn't . . . it has come out with a distinctive Aboriginal style."

Davis was attracted to writing plays after he read the works of Chekhov.

"They are so brilliant. I could see what was happening. I thought if Chekhov can do it, I'm bloody sure I can. So I went ahead and I did it. I thought, here's a way of getting a message across. It's so much more lasting than television. Telling our simple stories is a new type of theatre."

His plays, drawn from "real people" and performed all over Australia, in London, the United States and Canada, do not, he says, start

out in anger or protest about social injustice towards Aborigines.

"It's like my poetry. I wrote it because I love the country. But when I got involved in Aboriginal affairs, my writing turned to anger and I had a means of expression. That was not the original intent but that's how it happened. It became a weapon."

His instinct to write developed with his parents. "They were great story-tellers. My Mum was an unusual character. At the end of the day, she'd describe funny incidents about us children and mime them. We'd all join in the laughter, whoever was the object of the fun. And Dad used to love singing comic songs. I've put it down on paper."

Yet writing from his position in a society that deliberately split up Aboriginal families has had its influence. "It leaves a feeling of bitterness about the things that have happened. The media vaunts the fact that Australia is the land of opportunity. It's never been the land of opportunity for blacks and it's not in 1988, otherwise they wouldn't be sacking Charles Perkins or having an inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody.

"There's an imbalance in this country and it's tipped against its original inhabitants. The average white Australian must realise that Aborigines have the oldest living culture in the world today. They're just ignoring it. They'll probably remember it when we're all dead or bred out. If they remembered it today, they could be part of it."

Davis says he can't be optimistic about Aboriginal civil rights and justice without the addition of another political party to balance the present system of bipartisan government . . . "then not only Aborigines, but the poor, the old, the pensioners, white and black, would be better off. With today's two political parties, we can be ignored and used as political weapons by the people who are not in power."

Davis's world view is reflected in his latest book of verse. "I'm still an angry old man for what's happened to my people. I'm not a violent man and there are other ways of getting into the public eye. It's a slow, tortuous method but I believe we will get there eventually.

"Writing is one thing which will bring change, and blacks have made a great impact with their contribution to the arts, sport and other areas. To get the average white out of his lethargic attitude towards blacks will take a lot more work yet.

"Many of the people in my plays are characters from the 1930s. I've kept them alive. They lived under laws which have been operating in South Africa for the past 40 years. In Australia, they've been operating for 200 years. For God's sake, don't let's say Australia is any better than South Africa because white Australia is not.

"Some of the so-called native missions are just settlements no better than concentration camps," concludes the gentle but giant voice of Jack Davis.