

Kicking up dust — and more

THE AUSTRALIAN

Will the National Black Playwrights' Conference which begins in Sydney on Monday throw up a new style of Aboriginal writing? Oodgeroo Noonuccal, formerly known as Kath Walker, says Aborigines are beginning to return to their legendary past.

BERWYN LEWIS reports

OODGEROO Noonuccal thought it would never happen in her lifetime. Neither did that other playwright and poet, Jack Davis.

But Aboriginal writers are beginning to go back and link up with their legendary past, with their ancient symbols and totems of the Dreaming. And this return to the old traditions and values is becoming more evident as the Second National Black Playwrights' Conference, organised by the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust, prepares for its opening on Monday.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, who is adviser to the conference, says she "will be there to encourage the playwrights and people on the stage to act out their history", adding that it's better to act it out with guns and weapons on a stage than in a street.

Since she wrote her first plays in the mid-'60s, and became a leading black poet, she has believed her people are "born actors, playwrights and artists through the oral tradition of the storytellers".

In the old days her plays reflected her concern with the status of Aborigines and the "lack of communication between the invaders and Aborigines".

"Racists are still with us. But as well we had paternalistic people who meant well but made sure that the Aborigines today are not able to help themselves because they had the backbone taken out of them," says Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

When asked to list the titles of her plays she groans: "Oh God . . . *Skid Row, Obsession, Man Hunt* . . . I've forgotten. They're all here somewhere."

She will be joined at the conference by her second son, Vivian Walker, writer, director and assistant to artistic director Justine Saunders. The latter admits that slipping into an administrative seat and taking time off from acting has driven her to a point she describes as one long-drawn-out "Grrrrrrrr".

But growls and cries aside, at this moment more than 50 participants, Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander writers, actors, dancers and technicians from around Australia are packing their bags for Sydney and Macquarie University for the 12-day conference of workshops, rehearsed readings of scripts to the public and a finale, an awards night on January 21.

In the process a few white myths about Aborigines are bound to be smashed.

Take the Dreamtime. According to Walker and Saunders, the Dreamtime is not a myth, a story or a fable: "It's our life. The public always makes the mistake of saying the Dreamtime is 'an Aboriginal myth' but it's our spirituality and religion. It's very real to us and it's not a myth," says Saunders.

She believes differences between black Australian theatre and white will be highlighted by the conference: "White Australian theatre is influenced by Europe, England and the United States but what we have is 100 per cent our own stories."

And there are different time and social factors: "Our theatre reflects a longer history and the environment, as well as the socio-economic and the political situation of an oppressed people. But we're not going to bludgeon people with guilt complexes.



Oodgeroo Noonuccal . . . 'Better to act out our past with guns on stage than in the street'

'Blacks are born actors, artists and playwrights'

"We're creating an opportunity for Aboriginal people to be what they naturally are, terrific educators in the tribal or urban situation," adds Walker.

The eight scripts to be workshopped — comedies, musicals and drama for stage and radio — call for some interesting juxtapositions: corroboree alongside rap dancing, jazz with didgeridoo. The fusion of styles may well regenerate Aboriginal Dreaming as well as white Australian theatre, which is long overdue for an injection of energy and political punch.

The conference aims to show the performing arts industry that second-hand white ideas of what makes Aborigines tick are second-rate.

With his mother, a revered elder who is respectfully addressed as Nanna, Vivian Walker has co-authored *Why*

power and energy. Today they are so defeated, frustrated and angered by technology. They need a rebirth of fascination to keep them going and to keep them beautiful," says Walker.

For Oodgeroo Noonuccal, who first began writing when (as the only Aborigine) she and her son Vivian joined the Yeti Theatre, University of Queensland, this second conference will test how black Australian writing has changed.

"Young people are angrier now than we were then and they're impatient for change. We'll be getting a lot from our playwrights about the cruelty of the invaders, the private lives of Aboriginal people and how they've survived."

"The best way to tell the story of our lives and the justice we need so badly is to do live theatre. It's much better than films. I'm going to write lots more plays. But I'm more inclined to try to get black and white together now. The best of the white race — we don't want the worst of them."

the Corroboree. It is a musical play which, as Walker puts it, shows that "there is more to corroborees than a bunch of black fellows kicking up dust". "Corroboree," he explains, "tells about our history, origins, our totem animal, what we were in the Dreamtime, how we got here, what land features to respect and avoid."

Created in a contemporary vein it will connect with both urban and tribal Aborigines.

"Theatre stimulates changes much faster than bureaucracies ever will. Young people need a context to vent their