

# Ernie Dingo: a black proud to be bloody stubborn

Ernie Dingo, who plays the first Aboriginal film star Robert Tudawali in a biographical telemovie this week, tells BERWYN LEWIS how it feels to be black 200 years on

WHEN the telemovie *Tudawali* is screened on SBS on Thursday viewers who remember the movie, *Jedda*, may think they're seeing Robert Majingwanipini (alias Tudawali) risen from his grave.

Majingwanipini, the first Aboriginal film star, died in 1967. His body lies in pauper's grave No 103 in Darwin cemetery, a casualty of fame, alcohol-related jail sentences and white culture.

Ernie Dingo, 31, who plays Tudawali in the telemovie, is the product of a different generation and changing times. Recently seen by millions around the world when he appeared on *Australia Live*, Dingo says he also has "the last gag in Paul Hogan's *Crocodile Dundee II*".

Born on Bullardoo Station via Mullewa in Western Australia, Dingo takes many worlds in one stride of his infinitely long legs. He is as much at home in the Aboriginal tent embassy currently occupying the site of Mrs Macquarie's Chair in Sydney as he is in New York, the bush and a film studio.

He is an activist and an actor, a man who knows his Dreaming or traditional history. He is devoted to his family, "my real sisters and brothers and the 300,000

members of the Aboriginal community". And he knows white culture be it Coca Cola, Bollinger or his neat black Reeboks.

"Appearing on *Australia Live* was important because it is proof that there are Aboriginals in this country," says Dingo. We're sick of white people talking for us.

"I did *Australia Live* to say we have a black voice. We're still here. We're bloody stubborn."

According to Aboriginal culture, Robert Majingwanipini came from "shark Dreaming" — Tudawali means shark in the Tiwi language. Ernie Dingo says: "I come from the dingo and the black cockatoo with the red tail.

## Voiceless

"I'm about the same age now as Tudawali was when he made *Jedda*. I have the benefit of Tudawali's experience and that of other black actors and performers and I have more links with communities through phones and planes than Tudawali.

"A lot of bridges have been built between blacks and whites although some of them are heading to nowhere. Australia is no longer perceived as *Terra Nullius*, as Cook first saw it. We were here and we're still here. We were voiceless until 1967

when the referendum gave us the vote.

"They've spent nearly \$300 million for a 200-year birthday party. How much money should be spent on the Aboriginals' 21st birthday? It's 21 years since we became legal citizens of this country. Before that what were we? When do we have our 45,000th birthday party?" asks Dingo with a trace of irony.

His eyes scan today's birthday party site, Sydney's Opera House and the Harbour Bridge.

"All I want to be is a member of my Aboriginal community. I had a big job in portraying Tudawali. He was a striking man. I am glad I can say I was the actor not the man. I can turn back and be Ernie Dingo.

"The part has a lot of power. Tudawali had a piece of paper which gave him citizen rights to exempt him from being an Aboriginal, therefore making him a white man. He was black so the whites didn't want to accept him. If he did something good in white eyes the blacks told him he was getting too uppity. He trod a very thin line. Tudawali was a failure as a white man but he was part of his people.

"The film shows a man's life and his struggle for an identity. It's the struggle all black people in Australia fight. It's not just to survive. It's the environment,

the pressures, the cycles of friendship. I feel that now. I get a lot of resource from black people in Sydney but at times I need special resource and I have to go home for that.

"The white ideas of success for me are flash cars, flash furniture, flash house and possibly a white wife. That would make me accepted in white society. In black society it is doing what you set out to do, knowing where you came from and acknowledging people who are important to you, spending time with them and speaking the language with them," says Dingo.

## Contribution

The issue which most affects Dingo in the film is that of "paupers' graves, black or white".

"It's sad that someone who gave an impression to the world, to the country and to people is finally marked by a number," he says. "It's not sad for black people. We know who Tudawali is. We're very proud of his work.

"It's sad to know that his body now lies under a number. Is that the way to treat someone who has made a great contribution?"

"When I die let me go back home to my place — to where I started. Let me complete a cycle."



Ernie Dingo outside the Aboriginal tent embassy in Sydney . . . 'We're sick of white people talking for us'