

THEATRE

Return of The Cake Man

WHATEVER happened to the Black Theatre and its production of *The Cake Man* by Robert Merritt?

It opened at the Black Theatre, Redfern, Sydney in 1974, a vivid but emotion-obscured and self-indulgent production.

When a paddy waggon with uniformed police backed through a side door it seemed that the incredulous black and white audience was about to be busted for watching something illegal. This proved to be just the local state of paranoia. It was part of the dramatic action.

Despite its impact, *The Cake Man* was not sighted again until 1977 when a resolute Brian Syron, director, resurrected it at the Bondi Pavillion. Then all went silent and invisible again.

"I've been hanging onto this play now for seven years," said Syron. "It has something for all Australians. It taps into the very spirit of this country at a time when the West is spiritually bankrupt. The Aboriginal philosophy, with its emphasis on humanity, has something to offer now."

On July 1, 2 and 3 *The Cake Man* will enjoy a short and hopefully sweet season at the Parade Theatre, Kensington, before leaving to represent Australian theatre at the World Theatre Festival in Denver, Colorado.

This is the first time an Australian play has gone to the Colorado festival.

Jeffrey Joynton-Smith, general manager of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, announcing the idealistic nature of this Aboriginal export, expressed the hope that audiences with an interest in Australian theatre would see *The Cake Man* during its pre-World Festival Sydney season.

These days the Black Theatre is on walk-about. It has no building and rehearses at the



LOBBIE GRAHAM

Brian Syron and Justine Saunders in rehearsals for *The Cake Man* at the National Aboriginal Training and Cultural Institute at Balmain.

National Aboriginal Training and Cultural Institute in Balmain.

"Recognition for my play came from overseas," said playwright Robert Merritt. "Any money spent to direct Aboriginal awareness here is given only if there's a fair chance of it failing. White-elephant institutionalised administration is white, with a token black. The real policy-makers are not Aboriginals. What's more, no-one wants to know about the Aboriginal urban situation."

Brian Syron believes the tribal people of today are the urban people of tomorrow and that this has not yet sunk into white Australian consciousness.

"Tribal people are being dispossessed today. They see urban people as yesterday's dispossessed," he said. "Australia is seen as second only to South Africa when it comes to racism."

"It's healthy that this play can be shown to the other side of the world. It's good for Australia's image. We're lobbying now for it to be included on the school syllabus. It's a look through the missionary window. It's about dispossessed people everywhere."

After Colorado, Brian Syron plans to take the

production to Cherokee in the Smokey Mountains of Georgia and its 2,000-seat amphitheatre.

Film and cable services in the US are said to be bidding for the play and an invitation to perform it has come from the Theatre of Nations in Bulgaria and the Theatre of Emerging Nations in England.

"Bob will not sell," said Syron. "He can't be bought out. He's not looking to have his existence verified by Europeans and Americans."

He is negotiating to have the play performed at the Kennedy Centre, Washington.

The Cake Man has paid its fare to the US by hitting all the handout traps. A total of \$6,000 came from the NSW Government, \$15,000 from the Department of Foreign Affairs, \$500 from the CBC Bank and about \$27,000 from the Australia Council and The Elizabethan Theatre Trust.

Syron plays the lead, Sweet William, and Justine Saunders plays the Aboriginal woman Ruby. The two youngest members are 10-year-olds, Graham Moore (Pumpkinhead) and Cory Stewart (alternative Pumpkinhead).

— BERWYN LEWIS

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