

of maps and the representation of Antarctic territories. There are also a few maps which represent various aspects of the oceans, although these are not well discussed. This geographic complexity, however, might have been more fully explored.

Filling the major exhibition space of the Mitchell Library with maps, from the antique and delicate to the modern and technologically sophisticated, this exhibition is well conceptualised and visually stunning. The exhibition also has a strong online presence, with many high resolution scans of the older maps, and a digital copy of the well-illustrated exhibition guide.

The summer of 2011–12 has been a season of centennial celebrations. In Australia we are celebrating 100 years of Australian Antarctic expeditions, but the other major milestones are, of course, the conquest of the South Pole by Roald Amundsen and Robert Scott. This object-rich and intellectually-stimulating exhibition gives us the longer view, helping us to understand the long intellectual labour of our encounter with Antarctica.

Theatre of evidence

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Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country

Isaac Drandic, director

Produced by Ilbijerri Theatre Company and the Minutes of Evidence Project.

Adapted by Andrea James and Giordano Nanni, La Mama Theatre.

Melbourne, November 2011.

Theatre website: <http://ilbijerri.com.au/productions/project/coranderrk-we-will-show-the-country/>

‘This is my evidence’ stated Caroline Morgan, an Aboriginal women who proffered a grey blanket torn in two before a courtroom in 1881 at the Inquiry into the conditions of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station near Healesville in Victoria. Caroline told the court of the station’s mistress refusing her ‘a pair of blankets for her sick boy’ on a freezing night. ‘How did you do for a blanket for your dying boy?’, asked Ann Bon, the sole female commissioner. ‘I had to have words over it’, replied Caroline, ‘the children cannot sleep together on account of one of them having a chest complaint. So I tore the blanket in two’.

By the late nineteenth century in Victoria many Aboriginal people were effectively sequestered on missions and Aboriginal stations in accordance with the Aborigines Protection Act (1869). The Board for the Protection of Aborigines was empowered to ‘act as *loco parentis*’ and possessed executive power over the everyday lives and identities of Aboriginal people. All rations provided to Aboriginal people, including blankets, bedding and clothing, were considered ‘on loan only and ... the property of Her Majesty’, and recipients were not free to sell or otherwise dispose of them. The parsimonious distribution of blankets was emblematic of the state’s power over the everyday lives of Aboriginal people.

Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country, a theatre performance based on the minutes of evidence from the 1881 Inquiry, is public history at its best. Produced jointly by Ilbijerri Theatre Company, La Mama Courthouse Carlton and the Minutes of Evidence Project, *Coranderrk* comes out of a recent ARC-supported collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners. The Minutes of Evidence project, led by Julie Evans of the University of Melbourne, seeks to develop more engaging ways to bring the history of Aboriginal Victoria before a broader audience, including school children, and to foster new ways of understanding issues of structural justice in Australia. The performance was inspired by Giordano Nanni, University of Melbourne, who believed the Inquiry’s minutes of evidence, if performed, would be an effective way of relating one of the most important stories of the history of Aboriginal Victoria to the wider public. Working with Yorta Yorta playwright Andrea James, Nanni developed the script and effectively condensed around twelve days of judicial testimony into a one hour and twenty minute show. Although the original manuscript of the proceedings has never been found and the testimony is mediated by courtroom politics and the asymmetries of the justice system, the published version upon which the play is based nevertheless represents the closest we may get to actually hearing Aboriginal witnesses living at Coranderrk in their own words. *Coranderrk* presents two key narrative threads illustrative of the residents’ struggle: the constant argument over and pulling down of the station’s fences by nearby settlers, and Robert Wandin’s dismissal. Through these broader themes smaller stories also emerge, including issues of pay, rations and the treatment of the residents. The dramatic testimony from Aboriginal and other witnesses builds a picture of the harsh day-to-day life at Coranderrk.

While many historians remain trapped in textual domains and often struggle to make their work accessible and relevant to a broader audience, the energy and highly collaborative nature of this project has made it a success. Powerful, moving and with well-calibrated dramatic moments grounded

in historical research, this performance is emblematic of the scriptwriters' ability to mobilise a postcolonial and social justice agenda not only to make their findings publicly accessible to the broader community, but to create new synergies and engage meaningfully with Victoria's Aboriginal and other community groups. As Nanni explains, Aboriginal-Croatian director Isaac Drandric and the Aboriginal actors 'found the Aboriginal voices strong, they were not weak victims'. The play bills itself as 'not a play of black versus white': as Nanni continues, it is 'ultimately a story of dignity and empowerment, and of friendship and collaboration, between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. As such, there are historical characters that both contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences can draw pride from and identify with'. They include the inspiring leader William Barak and commissioner Ann Bon, a life-long advocate for Aboriginal people. Drawing on his practice as an academic historian, Nanni sought to reveal the complexities of colonial history: to show Aboriginal witnesses, including children, in their struggles; a humanitarian lobby seeking a 'humane' colonisation; and, beyond the daily and prevailing racism, a seemingly banal bureaucratic department that sought to balance the accounts.

This production emerges out of the confluence of several broad trends: the development of new legal, historical and postcolonial approaches that seek to examine colonial commissions of enquiry and engage with new theories of historical and structural injustice; the increasing indigenisation of Australian theatre and the determination of Indigenous theatre groups to present Aboriginal voices and nuanced cross-cultural histories to both indigenous communities as well as to the wider public; and a push to speak to a broader global politics of reparation and reconciliation. 'Verbatim theatre' or 'tribunal theatre' springs from the broad area of reality theatre, and is based solely on official transcripts of judicial proceedings. There has of late been some renewal of the practice of verbatim theatre, particularly in theatrical works that use asylum seeker testimony to humanise their experiences. Verbatim theatre, however, has been criticised by some for reinforcing victim status. Yet this is far from the case in *Coranderrk*. Rather, this verbatim performance reasserts the agency of the Coranderrk residents, and their fight. It is a powerful example of cross-cultural performance deeply grounded in regional history and politics, one that surely puts the emotional flesh on the bones of what might be commonly undervalued as difficult-to-access legal testimony or even legal abstraction. The mark of *Coranderrk's* success is such that it has recently featured at the Sydney Opera House, and a special production is being developed for students and will be trialled in high schools in Victoria. I recommend that you see it.