

No sugar



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The play, No Sugar by Jack Davis seeks to expose the racist attitudes faced by Australian Aborigines at the hands of white authority whilst also promoting the strength of the Aboriginal culture and people in coping with these attitudes. Davis has manipulated narrative and theatrical elements such as characterization, symbol and costume within No Sugar in order to present the plays many issues throughout the text.

Davis has chosen to present his Aboriginal beliefs in the form of a reversionary text, that is a text that challenges the common beliefs held by society. The text can be classified as a " jarring witness" for it attempts to disrupt, subvert and question existing versions of Australia's history. Davis has attempted to challenge the whites' accounts of West Australia's history and undermine their version with a Nyoongah's version of the past. In order to present reliable information Davis has used both official documents and the personal and communal memories of the Aboriginal people in order to create a dramatic narrative that presents the Aboriginal point of view.

The text targets a black and white audience, however, endeavours to challenge only the white person's expectations of the aboriginal culture. The play also strives to let the white audience learn of the extreme injustices encountered by the Aborigine's during the white colonization. In doing this it also attempts to let the white audience to experience the inability faced by the Aborigines in terms of power and freedom by the use of the Nyoongah language and manipulation of other theatrical and narrative elements.

The opening scene attempts to establish setting by making clear reference to the poverty the Millumara family lives in (a run down camp e. g.. of poverty, a soak where they must wash their clothes and themselves time after time) however the family appears to be cheerful and under the circumstances act much like a normal white family. This is done by Davis so as the audience can relate to the family being normal.

The Millumara's take part in white activities such as cricket, reading and washing clothing and the play makes references to other stereotypical "white things" such as tea, sugar, apples and currency in order to show the state of oppression they live in with regards to the white culture but more importantly shows how the Millumara's cope by accepting the white culture to be a part of their lives and developing a strong family unit that all work together so as they can survive.

The family at the centre of the play is the Munday-Millimurras. They are a strong aboriginal family used by Davis to show the difficulty of living in the time of a white oppression. Jimmy Munday is an angry, displaced and frustrated person due to the restricted life he must lead at the hand of his white oppressors. Although Jimmy is well aware that he is powerless in the society in which he lives he is well aware of the white settler's actions and almost seeks to make trouble because of it. An example of his beliefs can be found on pg (16) where Jimmy says " You fellas, you know why them wetjalas marchin'down the street, eh? I'll tell youse why. 'Cause them bastards took  
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our country and them blackfellas dancin' for 'em. Bastards!". In order to cope jimmy finds refuge in alcohol, song and dance and is not afraid to speak his mind with obscenities to anyone. Gran, Jimmy's mother, is the link to the aboriginal past. This becomes evident when she tells the matron about delivering her grandchildren into the world on pg. (60). Gran also like her son is not intimidated by the white authority and will stand up for herself and people at any given time.

Through the use of the character's names within the text Davis has been able to make symbolic references to Christianity. For example Jimmy's middle name " Emanuel" is Hebrew for " god is with us and the character Joe is short for " Joeseph" who eventually has a child with another character named " Mary". Davis has done this to show how the white settler's religion has been forced upon the Aborigines. However, when Sister Eileen is insistent upon the children of the Moore river settlement learning how to read Mr Neal denies her as he justifies " A little knowledge is a dangerous thing". This reflects Mr Neal's racial attitudes as if the Aborigines were to learn of the injustices they suffer they might do something to stop it.

The characters within the text have been created in a way they deal with racism in one way or another. Davis has made sure his Aboriginal characters are treated racially and the white authorities are the instigators of the racism. An element of racism towards the aboriginal can be taken from the law that states that Aborigines are not allowed to consume alcohol. On pg. (63) double standards are drawn when it is clearly stated that white authoritative figures in the form of Mr Neal are allowed to drink alcohol. "

Matron: Where did you get to yesterday?' " Mr Neal: You know very well I had to go to Moora to see about-" " Matron: to spend the day in the hotel drinking. Don't imagine no one sees you come in, the condition you were in - fine example". The quotation from the text implies to the audience that Mr Neal gets severely intoxicated, however, due to the racial law he is permitted to do so whereas the Aborigine's such as Jimmy Millumara is not.

The language Davis has incorporated is influential in portraying his ideas of Aborigines strength. The use of hybridity, both the Nyoongah and English language helps Davis to enable the oppressed and disable the oppressor. The use of the Nyoongah language helps to isolate the white audience in a power role reversal so as the audience can experience the injustices of the Aborigines. The incorporation of the Nyoongah language through the Aborigines use of words and expression enables to present the audience with a proud and strong Aboriginal culture. As Davis has chosen to write in a hybrid manner, he has also incorporated the English language into the play. The white authorities can be noted as speaking English throughout the whole play as so can the Aboriginal characters despite speaking their Nyoongah language. The fact that they Aborigines do speak English shows how the white settlers have tried to teach their language in the hope of removing their culture and silence the Aborigines however to show the strength of the Aboriginal culture the Aborigines still use their native Nyoongah language. Davis is trying to show the white society that they can take the Aboriginal land but they can not take the Aboriginal Culture.

Like the Nyoongah language music and dance plays an important role in

showing the strength of the Aborigines culture. The use of Jimmy's Grandfathers song during the corroboree scene and the actual corroboree places emphasis on the strength of the aboriginal culture in a time of white oppression. " Bluey: Eh, what that one?" " Jimmy: that's my grandfather song. He singin' for the karra, you know, crabs, to come up the river and for the fish to jump up high so he can catch them in the fish traps." The telling of Jimmy's grandfathers song shows the audience how telling of stories and singing of songs is influential in teaching fellow Aborigine's of their heritage and the ability to do this in a time of oppression is significant to the survival of the Aboriginal culture.

Symbolism is a narrative element incorporated by Davis as it enables him to expose to his audience the extreme hardships faced by the aborigine's. There are many distinct symbols used throughout the play, however, the most evident is that of sugar. The sugar represents a means of control on behalf of the White authorities and is often referred to often by Davis. Within the opening scene it can be noted that Sam is making tea and " Lacing them generously with sugar". As the play progresses the audience is shown that the Aborigine's rations are systematically taken away until finally they receive " No Sugar". It is at this point where it becomes evident to the audience the sugar is symbolic of the severity of the situation faced by the Aborigine's, for in order for the White authorities to display their power they must initiate a petty act such as taking away the Aborigine's sugar.

The costumes worn by the characters is important for as it provides the audience what can not be provided in words. The Aborigine's are dressed in

what is clearly clothes worn by the white settlers. Davis has done this as it presents the racist attitudes of the white people by pressuring the Aborigines to adopt the white way of living if they are to coexist. A clear example can be taken from the Australia day celebrations where Billy and Bluey are provided uniforms to wear. However, in an attempt to show how whites still marginalise them from society Davis has described the uniforms as " New but absurdly ill-fitted uniforms". This is incorporated to indicate that even though the White authorities are insistent on Aborigines becoming apart of their society their place or position in a white society will always be " ill-fitting".

Another Theatrical element that Davis has manipulated is the staging or theatrical space. Davis has chosen to place the Aborigines in the centre of the stage and rather opted to let the White authorities such as the department of Aborigines and the Northam police station to the outskirts of the stage. The clear manipulation helps Davis present the play from an aboriginal point of view and therefore challenge the oppressive society they live in as it shows a clear role reversal to the limitations placed on the aborigines. Having the aborigines occupy the centre stage also allows Davis to expose to the audience the difference in relationship that Aborigines have with the land and that the white settlers have with the land. The white settlers see the land in terms of ownership, control and boundaries with reference to certain settings in the play, at the white authorities control such as the lock up and the office. As the Aborigines don't value the land in the same way as the white settlers the control of the land by the settlers

ultimately constricts the aborigines to the white's boundaries entering white space at their own risk.

Davis has been successful in creating a play that manipulates theatrical and narrative that provides a different view of early Western Australian history. It acts well as a reversionary text challenging that of common belief with good arguments as to the level of racism faced by Aborigines and they way in which they cope with it. Racism is still a strong factor of today's society however in comparison with the text it is definitely not as bad and is improving all the time.