

Should it be an opera? (or should a biography be a film?) - transcript of a talk given to the Strehlow conference 'Where do we go from here?' Sep 23 2014

Should it be an opera? - dramatising the Strehlow story

The details of T.G.H. Strehlow's life provide immense opportunities for dramatically illuminating Aboriginal/European relations and cultural issues in Australia. But how should the performing arts tell that story in this day and age?

If opera is, as the Tasmanian-born opera critic Peter Conrad said, "a song of love and death", the life of T.G.H. Strehlow fits the bill (and I've heard people say that the Carl and Frieda Strehlow story is operatic too). But can opera really canvas the issues? The operatic cantata I wrote with Andrew Schultz, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, used spoken word partly to convey a larger-than-usual wealth of ideas faster than musical setting would allow and dramatised only ten days in what was an extraordinary life.

So, is spoken drama the solution? Should we take a cue from T.G.H. Strehlow's love of Shakespeare? Or is the Strehlow story fitter material for an epic film? These days, I live in Los Angeles and know how intrigued Americans are by the dramatic proportions of this tale.

But all of these solutions bring up problems. Many of the 'main characters' are still alive. What can you show, if certain images are taboo? Whose life is improved by telling this story? And what is an appropriate dramatic structure for the story of a man whose 20s were filled with extraordinary achievement but who faced his greatest crisis (a drama's 'inciting incident') in the last year of his life?

My paper canvasses some of the issues that need to be considered in order to render this important Australian life in dramatic form.

Talk:

Thank you all for having me here, John, *Relhe Arrernte*, *CDU twerte*.

I'm Gordon Williams. I'm a librettist (I write words for opera) and now student of screenwriting. The title of my talk is "Should it be an opera?" I'll be considering what can be learnt from dramatisations of the Strehlow story. I know that most speakers will be addressing pressing social issues. I can't talk with any authority about these things. I simply look at the accounts of Ted and the other Strehlows that have been written or produced over the past few years – and since the previous Strehlow conference in 2002 - and, having been partly involved myself, contribute my own thoughts. I guess the most I could say is that I hope that future artistic interpretations of this story will intrigue and involve both indigenous and European Australians in a way that helps cement our common wealth and add to our creation of a joint culture.

This is one way of looking at it: Imagine a story in which a young white man, just out of university, is invested with the most sacred ceremonial knowledge of an Australian aboriginal tribe. He keeps this trust for several decades, safeguarding ceremonies which command life and death, speaking up for Aboriginal people at a time when most white people in Australia don't know anything about Aboriginal people or even want to.

Then, toward the end of his career, he's faced with some of his biggest decisions, decisions which go to the heart of his true relationship with the people who entrusted him four decades ago. Should he begin the process of repatriation? Should he himself reveal secrets which are taboo? And what happens when he does? Does what happens to him - dying on the night of the launch of his Foundation - have any bearing on his own feelings toward the people he grew up with, the aboriginal tribe that invested him?

What a great story! “It should be a film.” Or should it be an opera? Either way I’m not the only person who has felt an urge to present this story dramatically. As John Morton once said to me in an email: “It bears telling and re-telling”. Well yes, I’d agree. It’s one of the foundational myths of how Europeans live in this country. It is certainly one of our tragic myths for Aboriginal and European Australian alike, one that can be studied in the perpetual hope of finding a happier outcome.

What if it had been an inspirational story, a story of successful cultural transference and renaissance - if Strehlow had held onto the Aranda ceremonial artefacts waiting for a time when the men of the younger generation were in a position to continue these kinds of cultural practices?

But we know what happened: that Strehlow himself didn’t transmit the ceremonies for various reasons and allowed publication of secret-sacred ceremonies that turned up on sale in the NT, causing grievous offence. One way of looking at this is that Ted fell at the last hurdle.

But you see, this failure is what makes this story interesting in terms of drama. Someone asked me why people are obsessed by Strehlow, why not look at Spencer & Gillen or Donald Thomson for stories of Europeans in Oz? But to my mind there’s an obvious answer: there were no crises there, no intriguing final confrontation with flawed inner thoughts, the thinking that might finally prevent a European from living life from an aboriginal perspective. Ted Strehlow requires Shakespearian portraiture.

The technical problem, though is that the fatal question - what some dramatists would call the ‘inciting incident’, whether or not to sell ceremonial photographs to *Stern*, occurs in TGH’s final year. While I assume – dramatically – that he went through some internal debate - it’s hard to garner sympathy for Strehlow at this stage– flailing around, railing at abandonment and lack of appreciation - and that’s a problem if he’s to be the sympathetic hero of the story. But the young man, the 23 year old who went out to the desert in 1932 was brilliant, industrious, courageous. Think about it: while other people his age were out dancing (at the Graduates’ Ball, as I saw in one diary entry), he was waking up at night in the middle of vast plains *so silent* he could hear his heart beating with anxiety. This has implications for a dramatic structure which requires conflict to get the ball rolling. We need to see the young and old man at the same time.

“Worth an opera!” said a Shakespeare scholar in New Jersey last year after I emailed him *Victory over Death and Despair in a Bygone Age*, my article on John’s book, *The Tale of Frieda Keysser*. And he’s not the first person to have thought so. [Or tried one: There was, of course, *Inkata*, Racing Pulse Production’s opera which involved a libretto by Ros Horin and myself, composers Gordon Kerry, songwriters David Bridie and Warren Williams and the local Alice Springs hip-hop duo Nokturnl, which was workshopped at State Opera of South Australia in 2008.]

But is it? It’s certainly got a huge emotional arc and this is what makes people think opera, in what is clearly an acknowledgement that even today this is the Europeans’ grandest theatrical form. I know that local man Warren Williams [the Deadly Award winner] loves opera and there are others who regard opera as white man’s *ltata*.

But I've been involved with a couple of musical settings of the Strehlow story and opera sets up a number of challenges.

Opera deals with emotional reactions to incidents (that's what an operatic aria is, basically). And you can't have too many. The music needs room to bloom.

What do you do when you have a story that is so rich in concepts - and difficult concepts - as Strehlow's? (And bear in mind that the Shakespeare scholar was talking about a story of the two generations of Strehlows in Central Australia – Carl and Frieda and their son, Ted)!

Andrew Schultz and I solved the problem partly in the dramatic cantata *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* – the work for the Sydney Symphony and Ntaria Ladies Choir that we spoke about at the last conference - by having a narrator (the older TGH Strehlow) and speaking parts (for Njitiaka and sometimes young Theo). We could get ideas across at the speed of speech, without creating a work of inordinate length.

But we also stuck to a comparatively short, intensely dramatic incident - those ten days in 1922 when Theo and his parents tried to get out of Central Australia before Carl died of dropsy. And yet, the rest of Strehlow's life is ripe for dramatic interpretation. The later life demands deeper thinking.

Of course, there are practical problems with dramatising any part of Strehlow's story. It's family lore for people still living. You're talking about people's relatives. And what if you yourself might intrude on cultural sensitivities? Should the story be set in Arizona or a tropical island where the imagery can be unrelated to anything likely to cause offence in Central Australia? But how then might the story speak to Australians, one of the prime motives for telling it in the first place?

I've had some experience with getting around this. I composed a supposedly sacred song, using Aranda phonemes which moved frustratingly in and out of identifiable Aranda words and with an undulating melodic contour that was close enough to *European* traditional song that senior Aranda man Herrmann Malbunka dismissed it as 'rubbish', one of the few times in my life I've been pleased with such a verdict.

And you have to consult widely. With *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, we not only wrote important parts for the Ntaria Ladies Choir; we consulted with Doug Abbott, Njitiaka's great-grandson, and David Roennfeldt out at Hermannsburg, the Strehlow Research Centre under Brett Galt-Smith, and got the blessing of the chairman of the Ntaria Council, Gus Williams.

And then, the bigger question, "Does any of this really matter?" *Who cares* what people in the arts have to say about any of this? As you'd probably expect, my answer to *this is*, "Yes, it matters".

We need our stories. Anyone who works in psychology will tell you that the stories we tell can influence the way we behave. We need stories for our psychological health.

Some years ago I was involved in writing a play called *Dust-off Vietnam*, a play essentially about the Vietnam War experiences of some fictional Darwin residents. We interviewed Vietnamese refugees (boat-people), veterans who lived in Darwin, and former demonstrators. We accounted for all their stories and on the night of the performance saw things that hadn't happened before. The veterans had never had much time for the South Vietnamese who "couldn't fight their own fight", but after the performance refugees and veteran shook hands; exchanged phone numbers; they stood around talking to former demonstrators. Everyone had a perspective to swap. We hadn't portrayed anyone as all right or all wrong. But we had tried to convey what it was like for them and created an atmosphere of reconciliation; for a brief instant each had walked in each other's shoes. And we did this without having to be unfailingly 'feel good'. Not every story was positive.

Australia is a land of stories, and stories that tell people how to live, how to survive. But if they're in any way predictive, I think we need to start telling new stories about Aboriginal/European relations, and stories that find deeper, more intriguing nuances. This way people will keep listening, intrigued; prepared to come out of their entrenched positions; interested in solutions.

Here - with Strehlow - is a story of an attempt to live in both worlds which invites consideration of why, or the extent to which, it failed - here's a story that should compel us to keep trying to figure it out. Who knows what we may discover?

With *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, I believe that composer Andrew Schultz and I pushed the story forward so that it became a celebration of the Aranda notion of Two Ways, or Both Ways - that ideal of a certain generation that they could live Aranda way and God's way at the same time. We saw evidence of that in Mavis Malbunka's presentation at the last Strehlow conference in 2002 when she told us how she was a devout Lutheran woman and then proceeded to tell the audience how her children got their Dreamings.

I want to play you part of the final scene, from this piece that was only at draft stage at the time of the last conference. Carl Strehlow has died and his son, Theo, is trying to work out the meaning of his death. His father was a dutiful servant of God but he's been allowed to die here, far from his German homeland. We try to express "the meeting of two cultures" as one answer, in the setting of TGH's translation of the Rain Song of Mborawatna as a choral fugue and then both choirs, white and black, joining in the Lutheran hymn *Wachet Auf*, though sung in Aranda: *Gloria lyarta unkwanga/relh'iperra Angel, itneturta...*

[PLAY]

....This is one of the reasons why it's important to me to keep exploring the Strehlow story, trying to find its ideal dramatisation. I keep making discoveries. I know other people have described Two Ways, but it was a new concept for me, and I would think for our audience.

One of the interesting experiences I've had living in Los Angeles is telling the Strehlow story to Americans who are used to the thousands of stories that fly around that city every day. They're

fascinated, but they have difficulty seeing TGH as the driver of the plot, the protagonist. Someone who resists calls for the return of tjurunga is not the one initiating action. Clearly a need is felt for someone else, a younger generation of guys whose clamouring for their 'birthright' will pressure TGH into making his fateful mistake. But even in the earlier years, when I talk about the 1930s, Ted doesn't come across as the protagonist. It's the old men who invested him with their secret-sacred knowledge who sit in the driving seat. And what this tells me is to figure out how much Strehlow's investment was a strategy on the part of the old men. They were activists in their own future (which may have kind of worked when you think how everything ended up back, available to the authentic owners, in the Strehlow Research Centre.) But really, think about it, would you have this insight if you stuck with a cliché or blanket assumption that Ted was a 'cave robber'?

I've groped toward finding a good structure for a film about this, if it ever got made. And because, as I said, I believe the younger Strehlow was a great man but the inciting incident for a really profound drama occurred toward the end of his life I've wondered if the best structure for the film would not be the typical straight-ahead Three Act drama that textbooks advocate. But more like the sort of hybridized alternative that Sydney screenwriting teacher, Linda Aronson advocates in her book, *The 21st Century Screenplay*. Something like what she calls parallel narrative and specifically with something she calls a 'preview flashback'. Principally, you use a framing device in the present to pose a nagging question which only a recounting of the past can answer. The preview is of a section of the story that takes place 2/3rds through. Then you work back to that point and beyond.

It could be represented something like this.

[SHOW]

A possible structure:

Prologue: an offer on the photos from *Stern* magazine. Things to weigh up - illness, unpaid bills. "Should I sell? Is it safe?" Dilemma: What was agreed in the past? – an admission of the undoubted controversy as a catapult into the earlier part of the story.

'ACT I'

Arriving back in Central Australia in 1932, the current situation. 'taken aside' and asked to take care of the tjurunga.

Doubts, fears, old loyalties, the difficulties involved (trekking across the desert)

the power/danger of tjurunga pressed home, but records, transcribes, photographs ceremonies.

'An avalanche' of tjurunga; will take them south.

"The 'urumbulak' ingkata'? I might be the last."

'ACT II'

GRADUAL Disillusion. Unappreciated.

Falling foul of the Establishment: (Sir 'Malice' Napier). *Growing aboriginal dissatisfaction with status.*

TGHS's illness, crisis of health

Aboriginal dissatisfaction with status leads to rise of a newly-politicised generation; a revival/the continued potency of traditional belief

The pressures of a new family.

Concern for legacy. Alienation between old allies. Struggling, fighting back.

An offer from *Stern*. "Should I sell? Yes - but no publication in Australia." We come back to that initial Prologue question with new knowledge.

'ACT III'

Publication of photos of secret-sacred ceremony in Australia, "the Atom Blast". *Outcry.*

Pushes back. Strident self-defence.

Will push ahead with the creation of the Foundation.

Dies on the night of the launch.

Epilogue: what happens to the tjurunga? what is the Central Australian view of Strehlow?

Such a story would allow a couple of contemplations of Strehlow's 'final act', but also an appreciation of the magnificence of his earlier work – the precise, painstaking, faithful recording of ceremonies and traditions that were about to go underground for who knew how long. Such a telling could create a tragedy we could all mourn.

Here's another thing I discover from telling this story to Americans, the extent to which all Australians share an experience unique to them. You suddenly realize how many assumptions Australians – and a large number of them – bring to a story like this. "How can they walk down the middle of a river?" say Americans. "Oh, it's dry!?" Or "I'm not sure how consideration of sacrilege can be dramatic stakes - a question of life or death – in a modern realistic story." But the Australians where I live, in Aussiewood as it's nicknamed, have no trouble understanding. These are stories we can tell around the campfire and understand the underlying premises. Aboriginal and European Australians might have different perspectives on this story, but we now work from some shared templates.

Last year I saw a draft of *Jandamarra*, a dramatic cantata by Paul Stanhope, Steve Hawke and the Bunuba People of Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia presented by the Sydney Symphony earlier this year, a work inspired by a model provided by *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. At that early stage I was struck by the way the libretto (the words) easily used alternative names for people or identification with animals. I wondered if the audience would automatically know who was being referred to. But I also saw these features of the script as a mark of the fact that the writers *could* assume this degree of familiarity with Aboriginal culture from an Australian audience – or at least, one that went to the Sydney Opera House. We are starting to share a common template.

Should it be an opera? Oh, it'd be great to think that the Strehlow story could one day be a cycle that's performed at Hermannsburg by the community every ten years. (There's my not entirely incidental proposal for employment opportunities.) But even if we fall short of that, telling and re-telling this story is a part of a reconciling process. In his 1967 speech "Where do we go from here?" [the title of this conference, by the way], Dr Martin Luther King Jr said it depends on "where we are now". And I think we're at a point where we're able to indulge in an increasing number of shared references. I confess this may not do much to solve pressing social issues but it's some sort of advance.

Gordon Kalton Williams

This is the transcript of a presentation to the Strehlow conference 'Where do we go from here?', Araluen Theatre, Alice Springs, 23 Sep 2014

Biog:

Gordon K. Williams is a writer and music administrator. As librettist, he collaborated with composer Andrew Schultz on a dramatic cantata based on Strehlow's *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (presented at the Sydney Opera House in 2003). He also commissioned and project-managed *Music is our Culture*, the first work for symphony orchestra to be composed by indigenous Australians. His current home, Los Angeles, often makes him nostalgic for Central Australia.