

Boom and doom

STEPHEN BEVIS

In every boom there are winners and losers. Behind the headlines of record profits, record employment, record mineral exports and record house prices are the stories of people pushed aside by the bulldozer of progress.

These are the stories that award-winning playwright David Milroy says need to be told. For Milroy, the mining boom is also a source of personal anger which he is venting in a new satirical work about the roughshod treatment of indigenous concerns in the North-West.

The founder of Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre and the writer of the international hit play, *Windmill Baby*, has been waging a campaign with his sister, My Place author Sally Morgan, against the destruction of rock art in the Pilbara.

"It is such a monumental issue that gets very little press and very little debate," Milroy says. He is speaking about the threat posed to the ancient art of the Burrup and of moves to carve a railway line through the heritage-rich Abydos Woodstock Reserve farther inland. "It seems a case of put a ruler on the map and draw a straight line and everything in the way has to go," he says.

Milroy says the State Government's attitude to indigenous heritage is so hypocritical that it cries out for the absurdist treatment he has adopted for the first time in his new one-act play, *Swine River*.

"The iron ore flows out of the country like morphine into a drip and the Government goes into a stupor and comes out with things like 'win-win for Aboriginal people'," he says.

Swine River will be performed by the WA Academy of Performing Arts indigenous theatre students working with director and course co-ordinator Ian Brayford. Milroy directed the students last year in a production of *Stolen*, a play about the tragedy of the stolen generation by Jane Harrison.

Set in the near future of 2018, when Australia's only sacred sites are offshore (Gallipoli and Kokoda), *Swine River* explores how remote Aboriginal communities are trying to maintain the last bastion of ancient rock art.

It centres on the story of Yarrie Snow, a man who is cleared off his tenement and given two choices: mandatory execution or go to work for the local mining company. Choosing the former, he stands before a firing squad but their bullets repeatedly fail to kill him. In true absurdist tradition, he is then put on trial for treason against the State for failing to die as decreed.

"There are lots of gunshots," Milroy says. "It is quite absurd. I have a go at everybody."

Milroy says an examination of the mining boom's excesses and injustices is a logical progression for indigenous political theatre that has examined the fallout from colonialism, pastoralism and the stolen generation (Jack Davis' *No Sugar* trilogy).

"Theatre can still be political," he says. "In many ways theatre is turning into entertainment without the edge that it needs to actually say something. This piece is the opportunity to say something about a subject I'm passionate about."

Milroy says the power of the mining industry in WA poses a conundrum for theatre companies increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship.

"I hope that sponsorship does not undermine the artistic integrity of pieces and the ability of artists to express themselves and to write about things they are passionate about without being influenced to keep their mouths shut."

Regardless of the success of *Swine River* next week, Milroy has too much on his plate at the moment to think about trying to find a more high-profile stage for the play.

Windmill Baby — about an elderly Aboriginal woman returning to a deserted cattle station after 50 years — was recently performed at the Belfast Festival and the Salisbury Festival and has toured Canada and regional Australia. Its next stop will be the Mumbai Festival next year and Milroy is involved in finding a new actor for the role initially played by Ningali Lawford.

He also is working as a writer on a television documentary about the repatriation to the Kimberley of Aboriginal skeletal remains collected by Swedish scientist Eric Mjoberg in 1910. Produced by Frank Haines Films, *Dark Science* is expected to screen on SBS and Swedish television next year.

Swine River runs at WAAPA's Enright Theatre from next Tuesday to Thursday at 7.30pm, with school matinees on Wednesday and Thursday at 2pm. Bookings through WAAPA box office on 9370 6636.



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