

Warrior's language of resistance

Aboriginal insurgent Jandamarra and the words of his tribe are being brought to life on stage,

Victoria Laurie reports

LIKE living, beating organs, two words and a phrase in the Bunuba language lie at the heart of *Jandamarra*, a new play about a real-life Kimberley warrior. Words for country, language and the notion of endurance underpin the epic story of this Aboriginal hero, which premieres next week in a Black Swan Theatre production at the Perth International Arts Festival.

Bunuba linguist and Fitzroy Crossing community leader June Oscar, who helped translate the play's script into her native Kimberley language, writes each word with a teacher's clarity on a piece of paper. "One word is *muwayi*, home or country, another is *thangani* or language," she explains.

"The phrase is *Burrudi yatharra thirrili ngarri*, meaning 'We are still here and strong'. That's what Jandamarra was," Oscar declares, passing the paper over. "He lived that and he showed the white man that."

Oscar and her linguist colleague Patsy Bedford are sitting in a Perth restaurant near where *Jandamarra* is being rehearsed. With them is Steve Hawke, the writer who shaped their community's oral history into a dramatised account of the 1890s Aboriginal rebel who eluded police and white pastoralists in the rugged cave country of the west Kimberley.

In historical shorthand, Jandamarra was a kind of Aboriginal Ned Kelly. A police tracker who dutifully betrayed his own people, he suddenly changed sides. He killed a policeman, released Bunuba prisoners from their neck chains and played hide-and-seek with his pursuers for nearly three years. He even raided police stations left unattended by troopers who were supposedly hot on his heels.

In Aboriginal parlance, he was a *jalgan-gurru* or spiritual man who could disappear, transform into a bird and shield himself from deadly weapons. He represented invincibility against white invaders, but it didn't last: in 1897, at age 23, Jandamarra was cornered and shot dead.

His exploits have been handed down in "whitefella" narrative as well as in Aboriginal oral tradition. Popular Kimberley novelist Ion Idriess wrote *Outlaw of the Leopolds* about him, while singer-songwriter Paul Kelly penned *Pigeon-Jundamurra*. Kelly is now the play's musical director and has spent time between tours in Perth working on the play this month.

Jandamarra is a big theatrical event in several ways: large cast, huge 10m high stage

set and an epic tale that Hawke has worked on for nearly two decades.

"I passionately love the Jandamarra story," he says. "It is the archetypal Australian story, magnificent on many levels but inherently difficult to get up. It's hugely expensive (to tell) and it's owned by the Bunuba mob."

That ownership was established in 1984, when Hawke and a group of Aboriginal elders formed Bunuba Productions to make a feature film about Jandamarra. Several times they came tantalisingly close to finding backers for a film, even attracting the interest of Mel Gibson.

But it was only when Black Swan Theatre Company expressed interest in 2005 that a full script — in Bunuba, English and Kimberley krio — began to take shape and a date was set for a stage version. Black Swan's Tom Gutteridge is directing the play, and Torres Strait Islander actor Jimi Bani (who appeared in ABC TV's series *RAN*) will play Jandamarra opposite Kimberley-born actor Ningali Lawford-Wolf as his mother.

Other pieces have fallen neatly into place. Several Fitzroy Crossing people with close links to the Jandamarra legend, such as musician-actor Danny Marr, will perform in the play. Marr's niece Kaylene Marr, whose father was a founding member of Bunuba Productions, has produced vivid drawings that have been animated and form part of the stage design.

An important song and dance cycle, the *Yilimbirri Junba*, will be performed with the play for the first time outside the Kimberley by Bunuba lawmen, singers and dancers.

Hawke has spent years adapting the Jandamarra story for film and now stage, sifting through conflicting accounts of his exploits. "There isn't a single Aboriginal version of the Jandamarra story," he says. "He's known to Aboriginal people throughout the Kimberley and different people tell the story different ways. (This version) is one I've worked on with the Bunuba people. Every draft of the script I've written over the years has been read, agreed to and changed by these people."

Hawke, Oscar and Bedford clearly have an easy, trusting relationship. They've known each other since 1978, when then 19-year-old Hawke, son of former prime minister Bob Hawke, deferred his studies at the University of Melbourne to go north and help in the Noonkanbah land rights dispute, near Fitzroy Crossing.

"June and I go back a long way," Hawke says. "I did a lot of work with Bunuba people long before I got involved in the Jandamarra story." He ran native title claims and helped set up local organisations, but ultimately left the Kimberley and now writes for a living in Perth.

Says Oscar: "It certainly has helped us, and Steve as a writer, that he's drawn from that personal life experience, relationships and journeys that he's had with Bunuba people."

Above all, says Oscar, Hawke has under-

stood the cultural and linguistic imperatives surrounding the making of the play. The cattle country that Jandamarra roamed was plagued with brutal black-white clashes; today, Fitzroy Crossing has been afflicted by youth suicides and alcoholism, and subjected to a harrowing coronial inquest.

Oscar, who is the wife of reconciliation spokesman Pat Dodson, is a prominent community leader who has fought hard to restrict alcohol sales in Fitzroy Crossing. Her most Herculean effort — and that of Bedford, who has nearly completed the first comprehensive Bunuba dictionary — has been keeping language and culture alive. Together, the two women help run the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, which has pioneered the recording and teaching of the region's languages.

“White linguists would describe Bunuba as an endangered language, since any language with less than 2000 speakers is considered endangered,” Oscar says. “But from our perspective, it's very much alive. We're alive and we're using it and for as long as we're teaching our future generations, it'll live on.”

That's why it was considered so important that when the character of Jandamarra speaks, he uses Bunuba as well as English (which the real Jandamarra learned as a boy stockman on a station).

“Inclusion of language in this project is right at the core of this story,” Oscar says. “Without the language, this story could not be told or the message relayed in the way that it should.”

It took the women hundreds of hours to arrive at the right translations. “We both work full-time, we've got families and old people to look after,” Oscar says.

There were unexpected rewards. For five days last year, Oscar and Bedford took all the cast members out bush at Fitzroy Crossing, pointing out animals and plants, walking along riverbanks, living the language instead of rote-teaching it in a classroom.

Another bonus was hearing once-lost Bunuba words resurface in the minds of Fitzroy's most senior native speakers. “People like my mother, Mona Oscar, have been helped to remember, or going back and finding the right word,” Oscar says. “To say ‘I am a hunter’, as Jandamarra did, is ‘*Ngayini milhalba*’. We hadn't really heard that phrase used before.”

“At first I just assumed we couldn't do Jandamarra in language on stage,” Hawke admits. “It never even occurred to me, quite honestly. But at the very first workshop in early 2006, Tom and others were talking about a scene and someone said ‘Well couldn't we actually do it in Bunuba?’ And Tom said, ‘Why not? We could have surtitles like they do in opera.’

“The translation process has been some of the most enjoyable work I've ever done,” he continues. “It's such a stimulating intellectual exercise. But it's also been a dramaturgical exercise because I'd explain the dramatic intent and they'd come up with another way of saying that in Bunuba, which ends up with a completely different feel to what I originally wrote in English. It's added to the play enormously.”

Another tricky area was using artistic licence in a story “owned” by the community. Hawke says he had to imagine unrecorded aspects of the story, and would write up two or three versions of what might have happened. “Someone might then say, ‘Nah, that's not going to work, that's too far-fetched.’”

Some dramatic liberties had to be allowed in order to hang the play's structure together. “The thing that unlocked the way for me was trying to understand why Jandamarra shot (policeman) Richardson and changed sides back to his own people,” Hawke says.

“I actually came up with a reading of that central event. All versions of the story — Bunuba oral history, Idriess, all of them — say many Bunuba men were rounded up at one time, which is when he shoots Richardson, releases them and unleashes this long guerilla war. But how come all of those senior Bunuba men finished up on a chain at the same time?

“I reckon — and this is how the play tells it — that it was a deliberate strategy. Basically the Bunuba were being decimated, they were on the verge of being wiped out as a free people and Jandamarra was the main agent of that. So the Bunuba people let themselves be caught and forced him to make a choice. It was a do-or-die gamble, basically.”

Oscar thinks that's plausible. “While there's huge artistic licence there, Steve's influenced by his long association with Bunuba people and the many situations where he couldn't help but think that it was a deliberate strategy.”

A lot will be riding on the play's success, not least Hawke's hope that *Jandamarra* may yet be made into a feature film. For Bedford, the joy has been in hearing the story of her country told in her language. “This has been the dream of the old people.”

For Oscar, the phrase, “We're still here and still strong”, is a message Fitzroy residents need to hear as they await the findings of the coroner. “Jandamarra is about the stories shared with us by people who are no longer here, or only in spirit,” she says. “It's about how we have lived as Bunuba people and chosen to bring that uniqueness into the telling of this story.”

Jandamarra runs at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre from February 9 to 23.



Still going strong: Linguists June Oscar and Patsy Bedford with playwright Steve Hawke