

# United by a strong voice of protest

JACKIE BRYGEL

ON December 6, 1938, deeply moved by newspaper reports of the mounting Nazi persecution of Jews on the other side of the world, Aboriginal political activist and community leader William Cooper led a protest delegation to the door of the German Consulate in Melbourne.

Some eight decades later, Cooper's great-great-niece, playwright Andrea James, and young Melbourne Jewish playwright Elise Hearst have joined forces to bring to the stage the story behind this extraordinary moment in local history.

The result is the evocative new play *Bright World*, in which Hearst and James also act alongside Kevin Kiernan-Molloy, Shari Sebbens and Guy Simon. Staged by Arthur, an independent theatre company, it premieres tomorrow (Friday) at Theatre Works in St Kilda.

For 34-year-old Hearst, a King David School and Bialik College graduate whose late paternal grandparents fled Nazi-occupied Austria in 1938, *Bright World* is understandably a deeply personal work.

"It's been so interesting to write about my grandparents' journey from Austria," she reflects. "In 1938, my

grandfather was accosted in the street by some soldiers and beaten up before being released. It was after that, that he came home and decided they were leaving.

"They ended up in Switzerland before finally getting a visa to come to Australia.

"The play is also an opportunity to give thanks to William Cooper for what he did in standing up for the Jewish people," she continues.

"So it is a very special coming together of different cultures and communities – a really nice point of connection."

Hearst has formed a close bond with her co-writer Jones.

"I think it's been a really successful collaboration," she says. "We're both in the play as ourselves. As part of our trying to figure out how we were going to tell this story, we realised we needed to be in it, too.

"The process itself has been very interesting, opening up conversations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, so we felt that was important to the story."

And one thing's for certain. Hearst, who has a two-year-old son Wolf and is expecting her second child in September, has a full plate at the moment.



Elise Hearst (left) and Andrea James in *Bright World*.

"Things are definitely busy right now," says Hearst with a laugh. "But my partner is really supportive. He's very hands-on, so I'm very lucky."

*Bright World* is at Theatre Works, 14 Acland Street, St Kilda until April 30. Bookings: [www.theatreworks.org.au](http://www.theatreworks.org.au).