

Insults fly as writers evoke a remarkable moment of Indigenous protest

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The Australian theatre scene is almost unfailingly polite, which makes it all the more shocking to hear Andrea James calling fellow playwright Elise Hearst a "smarmy Jewish princess". In response, Hearst labels her "an angry woman with a huge working-class chip on (her) shoulder". The verbal slurs soon boil over into a physical fight.

The pair are in the middle of rehearsals for *Bright World*, a play inspired by the true stories of their ancestors. Both are seasoned writers but the personal nature of the subject led them to take the unusual step of also performing in the work as themselves, revealing the fraught process of cross-cultural collaboration. They share the stage with actors Kevin Kiernan-Molloy, Shari Sebbens and Guy Simon, who seem highly amused when the playwrights begin sniping at each other.

Strangest of all is that this dispute was midwifed by a moment of extraordinary compassion and courage in Australian history. In 1938, the Yorta Yorta elder and activist William Cooper led a delegation of Indigenous Australians to the German consulate to officially protest the recent horrors of Kristallnacht and the ongoing persecution of Jews in Germany. Staggeringly, this was likely the only such protest by private citizens anywhere in the world. Compound that with the lack of rights Indigenous Australians had at the time and the actions of Cooper and his fellow protesters seem doubly heroic.

"They had no voting rights, they knew that there would be retaliation, that rations got cut, that removals were taking place," says James. "They protested at great risk to themselves."

James is Cooper's great-great-niece. She believes that her ancestor's march resonates so dramatically because it offers an alternative angle on Indigenous Australian engagement with global politics.

"It's really refreshing because often this sort of historical stuff in Australia's political history is so black and white. I think it really surprises people that our mob were so worldly, and that they empathised across the world."

Hearst, meanwhile, is the grand-daughter of Holocaust survivors, and says that Cooper's story is well-known among Melbourne's Jewish community. "I think it's the fact of his own situation, of being so heavily persecuted, of being so disenfranchised," she says. "Jews have long known that sort of suffering and persecution. And for someone in that position to speak up for the Jewish people is quite extraordinary."

Hearst had been pondering the idea of writing a play about Cooper for some years when the theatre company ARTHUR approached her about a possible collaboration. As discussions progressed James was invited to co-write the work, but it quickly became apparent that a safe and reassuring historical re-enactment wasn't on the cards.

James says that both playwrights are in some senses "living legacies" of Cooper's march. "I wouldn't normally meet or even interact with somebody like Elise unless this thing happened all those years ago," she says.

To situate the play entirely in the past would be to ignore its relevance to contemporary Australia, and so both playwrights committed to exploring the prejudices and misunderstandings that persist. The only way to really get to the juice of that, they say, was to begin with themselves.

"One of the starting points was having these conversations on the floor, trying to have uncomfortable conversations which was pretty difficult, not knowing each other," says Hearst. "It was purely on prejudice, on our face-value judgments."

What began as a series of polite exchanges quickly escalated into something else. Director Paige Rattray encouraged each writer to be more provocative – "nastier" is how James puts it – and soon enough the two were accusing each other of being spoilt, bitter, neurotic, depressing, self-obsessed and worse.