

"There's so much politeness between theatre makers, and if you take it to the next level, between cultures," says Hearst. "To break down those polite barriers, it felt like we had to really go there for this play to be relevant."

What the slinging match led to was a kind of contest of oppression, a "who's had it worst?" competition. Six million dead! Only 200 Yorta Yorta left standing! When comparing decimation and degradation reached a stalemate, the only thing for it was to begin hurling objects at each other. James and Hearst never actually threw any punches, but decided that their play wouldn't pull any, either.

Bright World tells the parallel story of Cooper's life and that of Hearst's grandparents, but the two also play versions of themselves in a meta-narrative that haunts the historical sequences. Much of it is very funny, particularly when it taps into the tensions that can simmer beneath cross-cultural exchange. The politics of a white-skinned actor playing someone of another race are usually treated very seriously, for instance, but *Bright World* sees Hearst just wading in there.

"Elise is very gracious in allowing herself to stay in that point of ignorance, which really she isn't," says James.

"Let that be noted," nods Hearst.

"But it's been a really nice way of drawing out what we want to say. It does get into extremely awkward territory. It's so delicious."

Addressing identity politics via humour is a deliberate strategy here, with the goal of asking audience members to put to themselves the same awkward questions of subsumed prejudice. "I think that's what our contemporary story is about," says James. "It really is to make people think 'oh, what do I think about Jewish people? What do I think about Indigenous people?'"

William Cooper must have asked these kinds of questions of himself before deciding to organise a public protest at the age of 78. He didn't live to see the end of the war, or meet any of the people he was standing up for. But today he is honoured by a memorial and garden in Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum and an academic chair and professorship worth \$1 million in Israel. Closer to his late home in Footscray, the William Cooper Cup at the Whitten Oval celebrates an annual AFL match between the Aboriginal All-stars and Victoria Police.

Cooper's march wasn't the only potent intersection of Aboriginal and Jewish communities in Melbourne's history. When Jim Berg helped found the Koori Heritage Trust it was with the contribution of Jewish benefactors, notes James. Arnold Bloch Leibler's counsel for the Yorta Yorta native title claim was pro bono, too.

Hearst was recently discussing Jewish rituals with one of *Bright World's* Indigenous cast members. "I was going 'so they tried to kill us this way and then we commemorate it this way and then we eat this food because it represents this thing.' He was just like 'wow, you've got all these rituals around commemoration and remembrance and we don't really have many of those rituals'."

But behind those rituals are 2000 years of persecution and survival, she says. "Whereas Aboriginal people have only been at the hands of colonialism for the last couple of hundred years. What will the future bring? What will 2000 years make?" Theatre, that oldest of rituals, is one place to start.

***Bright World* opens at Theatre Works on April 15.**

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/insults-fly-as-writers-evoked-a-remarkable-moment-of-indigenous-protest-20160401-gnwg1a.html>



Elise Hearst and Andrea James during rehearsals for *Bright World*. Photo: Penny Stephens