

## Aboriginal actor, playwright and director pushes forward with truth-telling

An interview with Tom Molyneux - 12 October 2020



**Connection Matters Radio (CMR):** Two weeks ago we spoke on Connection Matters Radio with Tom Molyneux, a Gunditjmara man who works as the Indigenous Inclusion Coordinator at Melbourne's Deakin University. We welcome him back to the show today, but not in that capacity. Instead to share his experiences as an Aboriginal actor pre-and during COVID-19. Tom, welcome back to Connection Matters Radio, mate.

**Tom Molyneux:** Hey, Charles. It's great to be back.

**CMR:** Tom, tell us a little bit about what you were doing last year in your acting work.

**Tom:** Sure. So I have a show called *The Mission*. It's a one man show about my uncle, uncle Alan McDonald, who was one of the first indigenous soldiers to enlist for World War 1.

He fought at Gallipoli and the battle of Beersheba and all those famous campaigns. I created this play about his life story basically, which also obviously echo the struggles of the Gunditjmara community more broadly, particularly through what happened at the Lake Condah Mission. And so with the play, we toured at around regional Victoria.

Last year, we went to about 13 different venues across the state and shared it with

different communities across the way. And it was just a really fantastic experience.

**CMR:** It's a show you were looking to take on a national level though weren't, you?

**Tom:** That's right. Unfortunately COVID's got in the way of that a little bit, but we're looking to postpone that now, instead of next year, we'll try and tour it nationally in 2022. But in the meantime, there's obviously a lot of planning that goes into booking a national tour. So, we're hoping to go to a bunch of different states around the country and take it a bit more broadly, share uncle Allan's story around.

**CMR:** But it seems you can't keep a good playwright, or actor, or a theatre aficionado down, because even right now you're working on another piece, aren't you?

**Tom:** That's right. Yeah. I've been lucky enough to get a small grant from the Geelong Arts Centre, down here on Wadawurrung country, where I'm based.

And so what we're looking to do is a new creative development, start writing a new play while we've got a bit more time up our sleeves. And it's going to be based on the story of an Aboriginal man from the Western district. He was from Mount Rouse and he was known colloquially as Roger, but his story was a really fascinating one, of the sort of injustices of the early days of the Victorian

colony. And he had a quite famous court case in Melbourne that set a few legal precedents, but it was completely rigged and unfair and a miscarriage of justice in my view.

So we're digging into that story to see if we can do it more justice. And it feeds into that broader truth telling narrative that I'm really keen on. That's what *The Mission* had at its heart, as well is making sure that the truth is properly told and recorded. And we've still got a long way to go on that obviously.

**CMR:** It's obviously seeking to prick the conscience of the greater Australian community, but tell us a little bit about Roger. I know it's a pretty tragic story and we were yarning about it before the interview, but share a bit of that background with the audience if you wouldn't mind.

**Tom:** Yeah, for sure. So, Roger was convicted of the murder of this white fella called Patrick Codd. And there was a lot of dispute about the basic facts of the case. Whether Roger could actually even be placed at the location where this whitefella was murdered.

And he had an identical looking brother and the whitefellas who were giving evidence, couldn't really tell the difference between the brother and Roger. And then after the verdict had been recorded, that Roger was going to be sentenced to death.

In fact, one of the Chief Protectors of Aboriginal people as they were in those days wrote a letter to the court saying, "You can't do this, Roger wasn't there on the day, this is a miscarriage of justice, et cetera." And they still went ahead and proceeded to hang him, unfortunately at the Old Melbourne jail. So, it was a real, real sad story, but I think it's, again, one of those ones that we need to tell, not many people would know this tale and it has to be told.

**CMR:** I think it is all part of the greater mission, which is truth telling. You're also saying, just staying on the story for just another minute or so that, because Roger, as the name he was given, couldn't speak English. He was actually offered the services of a translator who was a whitefella.

**Tom:** That's right. And he was actually the cousin of the Deputy Protector of Aborigines. And this cousin couldn't actually speak the dialect that Roger spoke. And he spoke apparently a few words of something else relatively close. And so he was sworn in to translate the proceedings of the court for Roger, and Roger couldn't really understand what was going on. He didn't speak any English himself and was all rigged really to go in one direction.

**CMR:** Tom, how important are the arts, actors, performers of all sorts to breaking down the myths that surround the past 240-odd years and play a part in truth telling?

**Tom:** It's really interesting that question, Charles. We have this conversation a lot, I think when it comes to education systems and how much culture should be taught in education and all of this. And in my view, there's clearly not enough, but I think the arts are one way of presenting some of this stuff in a way that's not a history lecture and that can tend to turn a lot of people off.

But when you engage people in that different way, whether it's through music, or theatre, or storytelling, people actually start to engage with the topic more meaningfully and deeply.

And I just would throw in there that I think through COVID, obviously artists have been particularly badly hit. But what have people turned to while they've been locked up in their houses? It's the arts. And I think the sooner we can get back to the theatres and to having our minds changed, I guess in those ways where we do, we sit in the dark and we absorb these amazing stories and they speak to us on a more emotional and more deep level. The sooner we can get back to that, the better.

**CMR:** Tom, whenever we think about Aboriginal actors, obviously we think about Ernie Dingo. We think about Uncle Jack Charles, is there a growing desire to have Aboriginal men and women and Torres Strait Islanders of course, take to acting. Are there more opportunities.

**Tom:** That's a good question. I think unfortunately the opportunities are becoming more scarce. I studied at Monash University. I did the Bachelor of Performing Arts there. And I would note that recently Monash have announced they want to close the Centre for Theatre and Performance, which is going to lock a whole extra portion of young people that might be thinking about studying theatre or becoming an actor, or director, or

storyteller. It'll lock them out of that career. I think there's obviously other ways you can go about it, but we need to be encouraging more arts education and not less in this country at the moment, I would say.

And the changes have recently come through from the Federal Government, that's going to make those courses more expensive as well. So, there's definitely some issues for the country to grapple with around how we're encouraging people, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors, into these careers. We need more, not less.

**CMR:** But there seem to be opportunities there regardless, even though they may not be mainstream. You did, for example, The Mission about your uncle, Allan McDonald, you did that. I assume on the smell of an oily rag. You've only got a small grant now from Geelong Arts Centre and a big kudos out to them. It does seem though that to make a name, or to make a presence on the stage, that is a requirement to just take the initiative yourself, go and find out what funding is out there and make your own opportunities.

**Tom:** Yeah, for sure. Look, that's certainly been how I've been dealing with things recently. And I think credit to the State Government here. Creative Victoria have certainly been making life a little bit easier for artists. It's obviously still very difficult, but part of the COVID recovery is going to involve stimulating the creative economy.

And so they're going to be pumping money through all the different channels, whether it's Regional Arts Victoria, or more Metro based artwork as well. There will be grants and opportunities for people to take. So, definitely artists out there need to stay positive, I think, and try and latch onto those opportunities whenever they come up.

**CMR:** Tom, we'll leave it at that for right now, but we will follow up with you, especially about this fascinating play that you're looking to develop about Roger. Until we do, take care of yourself. Thanks once again for coming on to Connection Matters Radio.

**Tom:** Thanks brother. No worries at all. Pleasure.

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