

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The amazing story of 'Bran Nue Dae'

'Bran Nue Dae', the documentary on the making of the Aboriginal musical, opens in Melbourne today. MIKE DALY talks to the director, Tom Zubrycki, and NEIL JILLET reviews the film.

IT is worth noting, while watching Tom Zubrycki's documentary on the creation of the successful Aboriginal musical, 'Bran Nue Dae', that Melbourne is the only mainland capital in which this show has not been staged.

The Western Australian musical was the surprise hit of the 1990 Perth Festival, subsequently won a Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award for its creators, Jimmy Chi and the Broome rock band Kuckles, and was successful in Adelaide, Sydney, Brisbane and Darwin.

It was apparently destined for last year's Melbourne International Festival but ran into financial difficulties between its producers and the festival's organisers, who, says Mr Zubrycki, "didn't want to take the risk". He is confident Jimmy Chi and the company will repeat their runaway successes when the show is finally staged here.

Negotiations are under way with Victorian Arts Centre to produce it next February although nothing has been settled.

The director, Andrew Ross, who played such an important part in getting the musical up and running, has just launched a new Perth drama company, Black Swan, but still hopes to direct the play in Melbourne and then take it to Britain in 1993.

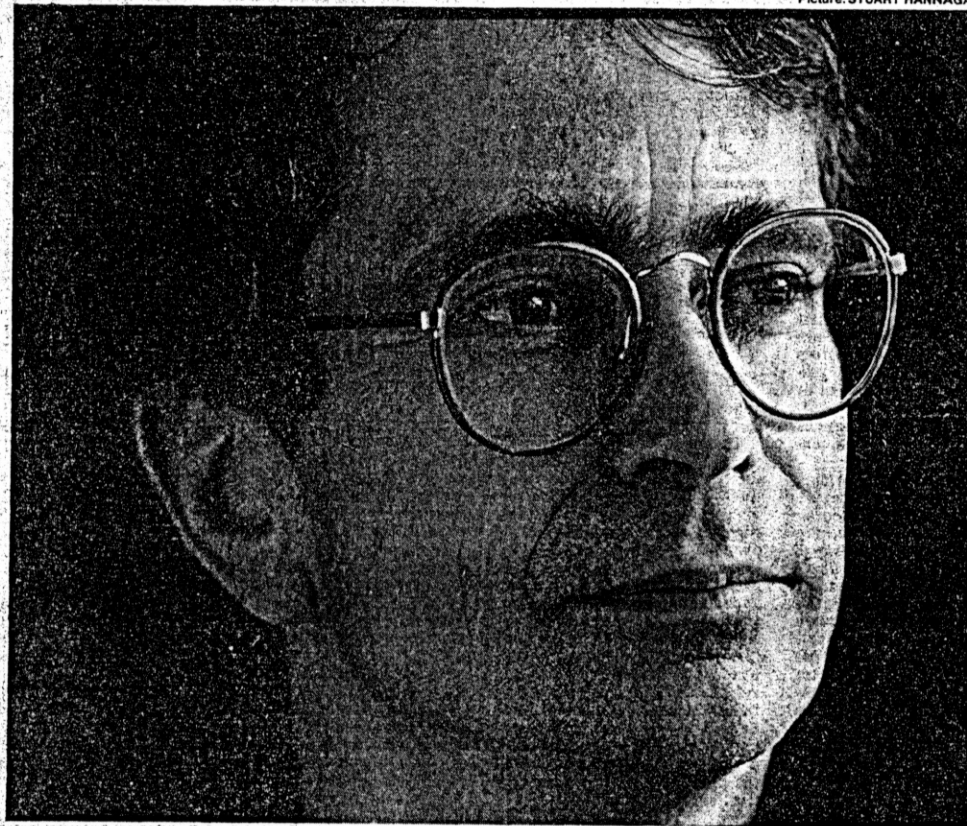
Tom Zubrycki discovered the 'Bran Nue Dae' story in Broome while filming 'Lord of the Bush', a documentary about Lord Alistair McAlpine. The English developer had provided \$25,000 plus the facilities of his Cable Beach club for extended rehearsals.

Mr Zubrycki filmed interviews with Jimmy Chi and rehearsal footage, which, although not included in 'Lord of the Bush', provided the springboard for his 'Bran Nue Dae' documentary. He decided to return and follow the fortunes of the musical and its cast.

"I knew it would start touring," he says. "When I returned to Sydney to edit 'Lord of the Bush' I could see the inherent possibilities of the 'Bran Nue Dae' material."

With the help of the musical's promoters, \$60,000 was promised from various sources for the film and Tom Zubrycki headed for the Perth Festival, where the show had already opened.

Jimmy Chi, a part-Aboriginal musi-



Tom Zubrycki: confident about the continued runaway success of the musical.

cian and writer, suffers from schizophrenia and his musical, a black fable, contains strong autobiographical elements.

"Jimmy was the sort of person with whom you had to pick the right time to turn the camera on and off," Tom Zubrycki says. "He'd suddenly break off in mid-sentence and talk about something completely different."

"I had hoped he would become the film's narrator but it was impossible to pin him down to read any set text; he would simply start inventing it and talking tangentially. In the film he speaks about music as therapy for schizophre-

nia and I remember him talking to me about the importance of blues and negro spirituals to his musical development.

"Through music he came to try to understand his affliction and work through it. He calls it a healing process... and he surrounded himself with friends. He talks of the simplicity of Aboriginal life, the warmth of that community. Broome was an ideal place to work through his sort of problem."

Tom Zubrycki, 43, had no formal training in film. After completing his BSc at the University of NSW in the late '60s he became a science teacher but decided to study sociology part-time and

began community work, running an information bus around inner Sydney.

He became involved with community video through a program initiated by the Whitlam Government and took the leap into a full-time career as an independent film-maker. His first documentary, the award-winning 'Waterloo', exposed the Housing Commission's conduct in inner city development.

Then followed the highly praised 'Kemira — Diary of a Strike', about a Wollongong coalminers' sit-in. 'Strangers in Paradise', a Bicentenary project co-directed by 'Kemira' editor Gil Scrine, followed 12 American visitors

around Australia in what became a dark satire on tourism. "It is my least-seen but but most interesting film," Mr Zubrycki says, "almost a comedy."

'Kemira' also won several awards, including an inaugural fellowship from the Australian Film Commission that allowed Mr Zubrycki to make 'Friends and Enemies', a film about the protracted Queensland SEQEB dispute. This was, he says, "an exhausting, personally terrifying film to make", and angry protesters disrupted initial screenings in Brisbane and Sydney.

He ran into even greater problems with the banned trade union history, 'Amongst Equals', dividing unionists and winning support from prominent figures. The unfinished film was screened with 'Bran Nue Dae' at this year's Melbourne and Sydney festivals.

"I decided to tackle a much softer subject after that," he says. The results were 'Lord of the Bush' and, eventually, 'Bran Nue Dae'.

REVIEW

Bran Nue Dae (State Film Theatre)

NEIL JILLET

TOM ZUBRYCKI'S excellent documentary is misleadingly titled, since it is not a record of the Western Australian Aboriginal musical, but a partial account of how it came to be made. Still, it does contain generous excerpts from 'Bran Nue Dae', and, even though the sound quality is not the documentary's best feature, what is seen and heard should make many people want to see the whole show on stage.

Zubrycki concentrates on interviews with the show's main creator, the schizophrenic and mixed-race (Aborigine, Scottish, Chinese and Japanese) Jimmy Chi, and with Chi's friend, Stephen Albert. We get perhaps too little bricks-and-mortar information (how money was raised, how the show was collaboratively shaped). The emphasis, always interesting, is on the autobiographical content of 'Bran Nue Dae' — the rediscovery by Chi of his Aboriginal spirituality. His sincerity and humor complement the exuberance and sardonic comedy of the show itself. There is none of the self-righteousness and anthropological stolidity that often afflict documentaries about Aboriginality. I hope it is a recommendation to say that Zubrycki has treated a black subject in a way that appeals to a more or less white viewer.

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Bran Nue revelation

4.5.91

BRAN NUE DAE (G)
AFI Cinema, Sydney

Australia 1991. Producer and director: Tom Zubrycki. Executive producer: Chris McGuigan. Cinematographer: Joel Peterson. Editor: Ray Thomas. Narrator: Stephen Albert. Music: Kuckles. With extracts from the musical play by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, directed by Andrew Ross. With Ernie Dingo, John Moore, Maroochi Barambah and Bob Faggetter. 52 minutes.

TOM Zubrycki's documentary about the making of Australia's first Aboriginal musical - the stage show was premiered at the 1990 Perth Festival and seen in Sydney this year - captures the unique celebratory spirit of the original and reveals something of the tormented life of Jimmy Chi, its remarkable creator.

The music numbers, written by Chi and the group Kuckles (of which Chi is a member), combine country, calypso and black spiritual influences with a wonderfully jaunty excitement, supporting a story about a young Aboriginal boy's search for his spiritual homeland that is part road movie, part rock opera and romantic idyll.

Chi - a former mental patient and product of a harsh upbringing in a religious boarding school in Perth - recalls the painful experiences of his childhood in Broome and the events that helped shape the musical.

The actors and singers are mostly untrained and inexperienced, but the passion and vitality of the performances are thrillingly clear.

In the age of the big budget, high-tech extravaganza, *Bran Nue Dae* is a revelation of what passion, inspiration (and some bouncy, singalong tunes) can achieve.

— EVAN WILLIAMS