PROFILE

'I can tell the stories from the heart of our country.'

Trevor Jamieson

BY JOYCE MORGAN

The enormous bull blocked the outback road. As Trevor Jamieson attempted to chase it away, the performer's wallet containing his passport went flying. By the time he realised, he was far out in the bush where there was not much need for a travel document.

So there it lay until Jamieson, returning from his long bush trip 18 months later and booked to perform at a wedding, hitched a ride along the same road. Suddenly he recognised the place where he encountered the bull and lost his wallet. He asked the driver to stop. Beside the road, glinting in the sun, was his Medicare card peeking out from his wallet. Inside was his passport.

"It was nicely intact because it was in this leather wallet," he says. "I didn't have to get another one."

Which was just as well. Because when he finally realised that the wedding was not in Denmark, Western Australia, as he'd assumed, but Denmark, Scandinavia – and the bride was the future Princess Mary – time was running short.

He relates the tale with down-to-earth humour, more impressed with the durability of his passport than the pomp of a royal wedding. Jamieson moves nimbly between two worlds; between a traditional life where long bush retreats ground him and enrich his performances on stage, in film and at the odd royal palace. He is as fearless on stage as he is facing a bull on an outback road, a man who has reached deeply into his own background to tell his tales.

He is about to take centre stage in *Namatjira*, about the life of our best-known indigenous artist. It is the latest collaboration between Jamieson and writer Scott Rankin and grew out of their stage show *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, for which Jamieson won the Sydney Theatre Award's best actor gong in 2008. At the end of each night's performance, Jamieson introduced a young man who had been quietly painting on stage throughout the show: Elton Wirri, a descendant of Albert Namatjira.

"The audience response was amazing because there was a sense of people knowing who Namatjira was," Jamieson says. "Scott said we should do something with Elton. There's a love of Namatjira's paintings, why don't we talk about his family and where he came from."

Namatjira's was a much-loved name as Jamieson grew up in a family in which both parents were artists. His father was also a policeman and Subiaco-born Jamieson, who spent his early years on the WA goldfields and around Esperance, was steeped in black and white ways. "My grandfathers, they'd get me up and include me when I was a toddler, doing all song and dance during ceremonial times," he says.

He had a talent for both. As a teenager, when he aspired to become either a policeman or a footballer, a family friend saw him in a school play and encouraged him to audition for Black Swan Theatre's premiere of Jimmy Chi's musical *Bran Nue Dae*. He landed the lead role. Since then, Jamieson, 35, has appeared in *Corrugation Road*, also by Jimmy Chi, Stalker Theatre Company's *Crying Baby* and more than a dozen movies, including *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

He is a natural storyteller with a quiet, understated wit and a steady focus. And as he sits in a break from rehearsals in inner-city Surry Hills, he recounts how some of his relatives were living a traditional life until the mid-1980s. Although they were aware of development around them, they chose to stay in the bush.

"They'd see cars going by, they'd wonder why. They'd see silver birds above, aeroplanes," he says. They would even venture close enough to remote Aboriginal communities to see football matches under way, even if goalposts, football jerseys and the ball itself caused them alarm.

"They'd see four spears on either end of this field, staked into the ground, and all these people with amazing colourful ochres – that's what they thought – fighting over a piece of meat, which is the footy," he says. "So they left those tribes alone and they went their way back into the bush. They weren't going to get involved with this, no way.

"That's the beautiful thing about my family – we can adapt quite quickly to a lot of change."

In *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, Jamieson related his family's story as Spinifex people from the Central Desert, displaced by the Maralinga atomic tests of the 1950s. He also related the heartbreaking tale of his maternal grandmother. En route to the wedding ceremony of Jamieson's mother and father, she was bludgeoned to death by a man wielding a wheel brace. It must have taken great courage to relate the story not just to strangers but to an audience that included his mother.

"Yeah. It took a lot of strength for me to go to that place," Jamieson says. "Having mum in the audience was very, very haunting and it made a lot of people cry."

In bringing such painful stories to the stage, Rankin is mindful of the effect on performers and audiences.

"Trevor and I have worked long and hard at bringing real issues and real pain and real story to the stage," he says. "These shows are our attempt to create an atmosphere of healing that is deeply theatrical but, when you leave the theatre, you are more inclined to take action than less."

In part, Jamieson decided to tell his family's story to heal the pain that had cast such a long shadow over them. Did it?

"Yes, it did. It was a show where I was trying to find out who I am and who I belong to," Jamieson says.

Now, he says, he has. "I walk in both worlds. I have access to the traditional life and urban life as well. I can tell the stories from the heart of our country and in some ways, they're stories we only see in dot paintings or pictures. After that experience, now I can tell people how it is."

Telling Namatjira's tale is a different matter to telling his family's story, not least because Jamieson is from a different tribal group to the Western Aranda painter. "There's a lot of pressure to get this right, other people's expectations. 'Why is it that you're a Pitjantjatjara person?' – that's what I'll hear from my own mob.

"'Trevor Jamieson is a skinny lad but Albert Namatjira was a big man, strong, stockman, good cowboy, camel rider.' All that stuff. I'm fine with it. I'm OK. I just make sure that people understand."

Jamieson will play several roles in the work. Rankin has no doubts about the actor's ability to shift between them.

"He has a great physical range," Rankin says. "He is a beautiful mover, he is very light and centred in the space, he is a beautiful singer.

"There's only a few actors who can step beyond the roles they are playing and hold 500 or so people. He has great dexterity. He goes his own way. It's what makes him really powerful."

The tale is one of highs and lows. Namatjira, who died in 1959, was granted citizenship when Aborigines were considered part of the flora and fauna. He met the Queen and became the first indigenous person listed in *Who's Who*. He was feted by white society but caught in its double standards and between the white and black law. His citizenship meant he could legally buy alcohol – but not share it with his extended family – and was incarcerated for supplying it.

Intertwined is a lesser-known story about an enduring friendship between Namatjira and the white man who helped sparked his art, Rex Batterbee.

A soldier-turned-artist, Batterbee travelled to central Australia on a painting trip where he hired Namatjira as his cameleer and introduced him to watercolour painting. Batterbee realised that in his vivid landscapes, Namatjira had seen the land in a way European eyes had not. Namatjira's works sparked a new movement in painting, which is carried on today by his descendants. Some of them, including Elton Wirri and Kevin Namatjira, will take part in the Belvoir and Big hART production painting on stage as the story unfolds. So too will artist Robert Hannaford,

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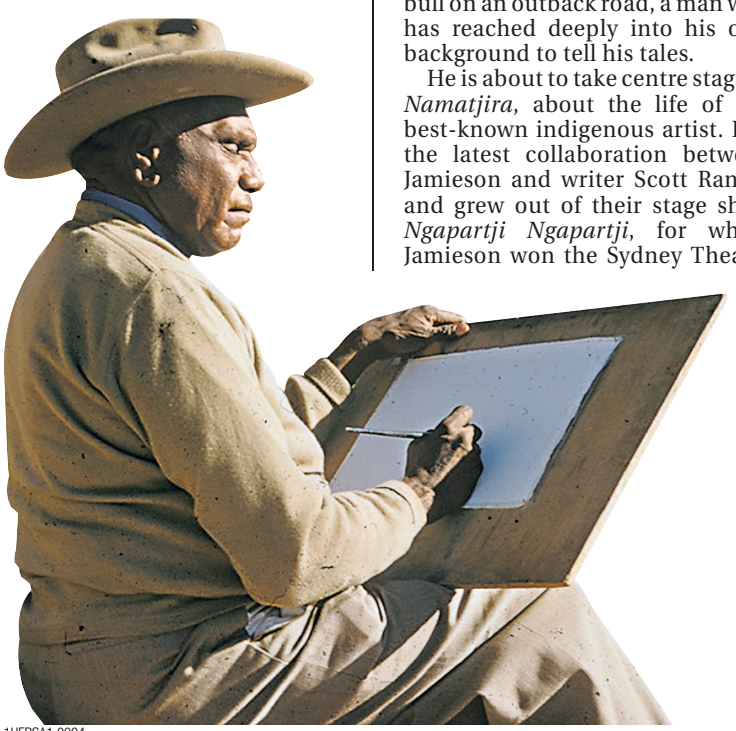

Lauded … actor Trevor Jamieson, who plays Albert Namatjira (below left) in *Namatjira*. Photos: Steven Siewert; Strehlow Research Centre

who will paint Jamieson's portrait. Over the past couple of years, Jamieson has come to know both Namatjira's and Batterbee's family and has learnt how that first painting trip hinged on capricious fate. Batterbee, deciding whether to head to Queensland or central Australia, tossed a coin.

"I reckon there wouldn't be a Namatjira story until the flip of a coin," Jamieson says. "Heads came up and out came Namatjira."

In the friendship between the two men – a vision of what black and white relationships could have become – there are parallels between Jamieson and Rankin, who have worked together for more than a decade and whose families have become friends. Like their friendship, their collaboration has a life beyond the show. They are working with Namatjira's family to bring an exhibition of their paintings to Birrung Gallery during the run of the show. Some family members will also give painting workshops in Sydney. In the pipeline are plans for the artists to undertake painting trips to their ancestral lands as Namatjira did.

"First it was Rex Batterbee and Albert Namatjira," Jamieson says. "It became the birth of a whole new movement in watercolours. We want people to actually see that he still exists through their paintings." For Jamieson, his work is a new way to strengthen his ancient culture.

"My elders encourage us to keep up with the world. At the same time, we are keeping our stories alive … we've excelled in telling our stories orally all the time but now we do it in different ways."

Namatjira **is at Belvoir St Theatre until November 7.**