



## JACK LEONARD DAVIS

### 1917-2000

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Jack Davis was born in 1917 in Perth, the fourth of eleven children to Aboriginal parents who originally came from the northwest of the State of Western Australia. On his father's side there was a descent from the 19th century Afghan community connected with establishing the camel transport system in areas of the western desert. In old age he had a striking appearance with sharp blue eyes, a chiseled, rugged face and snow white hair. He was brought up in a hardworking family in the small southwest town of Yarloop, his father, William, being a foreman at the timber mill. With the Depression tightening job opportunities, the Chief Protector for Aborigines, A.O. Neville, persuaded his father to send him at age fourteen, with one of his brothers, to the Moore River Aboriginal

Settlement, one hundred kilometres north of Perth, to be trained in farming methods. This turned out to be useless menial labour but during his year there, Jack Davis for the first time met Aboriginal people from a wide variety of geographical origins, some of whom maintained their languages and carried out banned ceremonial activities unbeknownst to the authorities, and these experiences provided much of the raw material for his play, *No Sugar*. As a young man, Davis hitched his way north to Carnarvon in the mid 1930s and earned his living as a truck driver and kangaroo shooter. He personally revolted against the night curfew then imposed on Aboriginal people in those towns under the Western Australia Aboriginal Act and was put in gaol on two occasions. It was here in the northwest that he first came in contact with full tribal Aboriginal society and the brutal degrading conditions in which many lived on the edges of the pastoral stations, an experience which deeply affected his world view. Returning to the south during the Second World War, Davis married and worked in a timber mill. He joined the Brookton Aboriginal Church, taught in the Sunday School and thought of entering the ministry. In the early 1960s he moved back to Perth maintaining his link with the Aboriginal church, which was now affiliated with the Aboriginal Advancement Council (AAC). Davis became manager of its community centre and later President of the AAC. In 1971 he became the Western Australia State Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and a year later established a 'tent embassy' outside the State parliament. It was at this time that his literary career started to flower with the publication of his first book of poems, *The First Born and Other Poems*, published in 1968. He published *Identity*, a magazine devoted to Aboriginal issues in Western Australia, in which he included poetry written under his own pen name of 'Jagardoo'. His play, *The Dreamers*, opened in Bunbury in 1972. Another play, *Kullark*, was commissioned in 1979 as part of Western Australia's 150th anniversary and was a dramatised account of Aboriginal history in the west, which confronted the audience with its accounts of the often bloody clashes which this entailed.

The work that was probably Davis' most influential, *No Sugar*, was commissioned in 1985 for the Festival of Perth and the following year toured to the World Theatre Festival in Vancouver where it received a standing ovation and resulted in Davis being awarded the Australian Writers' Guild award for the best stage play of that year. It is a tough but also witty commentary on the vicissitudes of Aboriginal families during the time of a State election in the 1930s when the town did not want to have any blacks around and they were shifted to a distant reserve. The drama revolves around the oppression of having very trivial aspects of one's life capriciously controlled by a dominant segment of society, whose most unworthy representatives seem to exert absolute power. Within this situation, however, humour and a laconic fatalism are interwoven with the enduring attitudes of survival within strong family relations. The profound and unexpected impact which this play had on the literary commentator Frank Devine was recounted by him in *The Australian* (30 March 2000) written a few days after Davis's death. These plays became a platform for the careers of a new generation of Aboriginal actors including Ernie Dingo who played the part of Jimmy in *No Sugar*. Davis himself also often acted, for which he had a great aptitude and continued to enjoy into old age. The critic Katherine Brisbane, whose Currency Press published several of his plays, wrote that 'he inspired other Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to use the stage as a forum for communicating with white people'.

Despite the trials of his life, Davis held no bitterness and was strongly supportive of non-Aboriginal peoples' involvement in the political and artistic issues of reconciliation. With failing health due to diabetes and heart problems, he still remained an activist, protesting against the clear felling of old forests in the southwest and against Western Australia's laws of mandatory sentencing. One of his most famous poems, *John Pat*, was about the death of a boy in the Roebourne police cells in 1983, which was one of the critical events leading to the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody. This poem has been set to music recently by the Aboriginal songwriter, Archie Roach.

He wrote an autobiography of his early years, *A Boy's Life*, published by Magabala Books in 1991; a biography, *Jack Davis: A Life Story* by K. Chesson was published by Dent Australia in 1988. Honours which he received included an MBE in 1976 and an AM in 1985 for his contribution to Australian literature. In 1984 he was awarded an Honorary DLitt from Murdoch University where he had helped to set up a course for Aboriginal writers. In 1989 he received one of the seven inaugural Australian Creative Fellowships established by the Commonwealth Government under Paul Keating. During the 1980s he was elected to the Council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, which published a brief outline of his life in their *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* (1994). He was also a member of the Aboriginal Arts Board. An insightful assessment of his literary work was published by Vickie Laurie, as an obituary in *The Australian* on 22 March 2000.

In 1992 Davis was made an Honorary Fellow of the Academy, the first and so far only member of the Fellowship of Aboriginal descent.

*Betty Meehan and Rhys Jones*  
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