**Brian Syron – Forgotten Aboriginal Hero of Theatre**

Like so many of the genuine heroes of the Aboriginal struggle for justice who were not deemed acceptable by the gatekeepers of Australian history, Brian Syron had to suffer the slings and arrows of fools who did not understand nor appreciate his contribution. Yet here was a man whose achievements were truly remarkable for his time, and who was at heart a passionate fighter for his people. He demanded to be treated with dignity and respect and for that he was denigrated and dismissed by the professional white ‘Aboriginal industry’ bureaucrats and their coconut underlings and empire-builders. This year marks the tenth anniversary of his passing and is an appropriate time to reflect on his awesome lifetime of achievements.

Brian Syron was born one of eight children in 1934 in the Sydney suburb of Balmain. He would spend a significant part of his childhood living with his grandmother in Karuah on the north coast of NSW, but as a teenager got in minor trouble with the law doing a short spell in a juvenile institution. But by the age of 22 his life was back on track and he became a male model and started to learn acting at the Ensemble Theatre Company in Sydney. At the Ensemble in 1960 he studied under the late Hayes Gordon who was a New York trained American actor/director and esteemed teacher of the Strasberg Method. Among Syron’s fellow acting students at that time were Jack Thompson, Reg Livermore and John Ewing.

In early 1961 Brian left Australia to further pursue male modelling work in Europe with fashion houses such as Dior and Cardin, but later that year moved to New York where he decided to resume acting. In September 1961 he had the honour of being the first Australian accepted into the legendary *Stella Adler Studio* in New York. At the time among Stella Adler’s most famous students had been Marlon Brando. During Brian Syron’s time at the Studio his fellow classmates included Robert de Niro and Warren Beatty. I must confess that as a Redfern blackfella when Brian first told me this story about who some of his classmates had been during his time in New York, I was both impressed and sceptical. Brian used to talk about his mate ‘Bobby’, and I one day said, ‘Bobby who?’ and Brian replied, ‘Bobby de Niro, Baby!’ I still remember that Brian delivering that line, but my scepticism was only resolved when Robert de Niro later visited Australia and we realised Brian’s story was true.

But this was only the beginning of Brian Syron’s remarkable journey. When he completed his training with Stella Adler he went to London where he continued studies at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, after which he returned to New York. Over the next five years Syron would co-found a theatre company in Saratoga Springs, New York, tour as a director with the Boston/Herald Travellers Shakespeare Company, tour through the Appalachian Mountains and work with the Louisville Shakespeare Festival, Cincinnati In the Park as well as productions in Ohio, New Jersey and Paducah, Kentucky. At the same time he had the privilege of being invited to conduct occasional classes at Stella Adler’s Studio.

His remarkable theatrical output in America would continue as he worked as an actor with the Establishment Theatre Company for producer Sybill Burton Christopher, and comedy legends Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. He worked for The New Theatre in New York and various productions including *The Mad Show Review* for Stephen Sondheim. In 1968 Brian toured the Southern states of America playing in Atlanta, Georgia; Roenoke, Virginia; Nashville, Tennessee and Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina.

After the experience of touring the South in America during the tempestuous era of the American Civil Rights movement, Brian became intensely politicised and decided it was time to return home. It was a fortuitous time for Syron to come back as the the Australia he returned to was just beginning to become more aware of Aboriginal rights issues. In 1965 Charles Perkin’s Freedom Ride had made international headlines and 1967 Referendum had resulted in a dramatic groundswell of support for Aboriginal people.

However, State and Federal governments seemed resistant to change and there was an emerging Black power movement in the cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Whilst Brian was conscious of these developments he chose initially to establish his credentials in Australian theatrical circles. In 1970 Syron joined the Old Tote Theatre in Kensington, Sydney, where he was the first Indigenous Australia to work as a director in the mainstream Australian theatre industry.

In 1969 Syron had taught a group of urban Aboriginal actors to study Stanislavsky or acting from an Indigenous perspective. The classes were held at the Foundation of Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney and the actors included Denis Walker and myself. He followed this in the early 1972 with workshops and acting classes held at the Black Theatre Arts & Cultural Centre in Redfern where, as Artistic Director, he taught such future Indigenous luminaries as WA Poet Jack Davis, QLD storyteller Maureen Watson and Victorian Hyllus Maris, who later co-wrote the legendary TV series “Women of the Sun”.

In 1973 as a foundation member of the Peter Summerton Foundation Syron organised with his mentor Stella Adler to travel to Australia and conduct a series of Master Classes for people from all areas of the Australian entertainment industries. This was the only time Ms Adler travelled to Australia. As a result of these classes Syron instigated The Artists' Group Theatre with first workshops being held in the sculpture studio of Ron Robertson Swann before moving to The Stables Theatre in Kings Cross. During this year he was invited to teach drama to The Resurgent Society inmates of Parramatta Gaol. He accepted the offer and was involved with the Society for the next 12 months. His group included playwrights Jim McNeil and Robin Thurston. Syron is believed to be the first drama teacher to work in the prison system of New South Wales.

So it is clear from his resume that Brian Syron was an important and significant figure in both Aboriginal history and the history of theatre in Australia. But what is also important is that I convey to my readers a sense of Brian Syron the man. I saw Brian on occasions to be extraordinarily witty and charming. His stories of life in New York were compelling and mind-boggling. He was an incorrigible name-dropper, but the names he dropped at times for a blackfella were spectacular, such as the story I told earlier about Robert De Niro.

But Brian was also a passionate and angry man, who despised the duplicity and dishonesty of numerous do-gooders in the Australian arts scene. He can be seen in Bruce McGuinness’ 1974 film “Time to Dream” angrily and eloquently denunciating a Northern Territory arts administrator. This performance was in equal measures passionate, angry and theatrical and gives an insight into what Syron stood for. He was at the end of the day, a man of the people, even though many of his own people misunderstood him or were intimidated by him achievements.

In the end it meant that Brian was subjected to unwarranted indignations at the hands of many lesser human beings masquerading as arts administrators and gatekeepers. To those of us who knew Brian however, in our memory his legacy is one of having been the great teacher he always wanted to be.

**Gary Foley**

July 2013