

Where I Belong

Episode 6: Wesley Enoch AM

Podcast transcript

Museum of Brisbane acknowledges and advises that the following transcript refers to an Aboriginal Elder who has passed away.

Wesley Enoch AM:

I remember this march, Aboriginal rights march, coming down George Street, and coming to this gate into Parliament House, and then pulling at the gate pushing, pulling, pushing and pulling. And eventually the gate came off its hinges, I don't know how it did that - it came off. And there's this moment of silence, this moment of "What, what do we do now? Do we walk through? Do we not walk through?"

Wendy Love:

For Wesley Enoch, the theatre director and playwright, it was never really in doubt that the intersection of political activism and the arts would be central to his life's purpose. It's in his DNA.

WE:

And that was the moment I went, that's when you send in your storytellers. That's when you send in your poets and your artists. That's when you go in and you start to say, how do we do a hearts and minds campaign about shifting the perspective? Not for the 'capital P' politics, but the 'small p' politics, the kind of social movements - that's important.

WL:

Wesley's dad's side of the family is from Minjerribah, North Stradbroke Island. His great aunt Kath was Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the political activist and poet.

WE:

She was a very big figure in the family coming from Minjerribah. And this idea of where politics and art come together. And this real sense of how you change the world is by looking at the politics and art together - the storytelling and the political activism. And in many ways, that's all through our family.

WL:

But it wasn't until he finished uni that he came to see how those two things would manifest in his own life.

INTRO

WL:

From Museum of Brisbane, this is *Where I Belong*, a show that brings you stories about fascinating and creative people, shaped by Brisbane. I'm Wendy Love. On this episode, Wesley Enoch and the unexpected opportunity that turned an aspiring teacher into a revolutionary playwright.

MUSIC

WL:

Wesley Enoch isn't the kind of guy who likes to sit still. The only times he really socialised with school mates was to work on the school magazine, rehearse for a play or at committee meetings.

WE:

My social life was quite limited in that way, I was focused pretty much on achievement. And friends got involved in the school musical, so we'd hang out together and do things like that. But no, it wasn't a kind of sitting around, gossiping was not my thing. I was action, action, action, action, action. I think I still live like that now (laughing).

WL:

No kidding. The man has jumped from one project to the next for the past three decades.

WE:

I've been Artistic Director of the Sydney Festival, Resident Director at the Sydney Theatre Company, Artistic Director of Kooemba Jdarra, an Aboriginal Theatre Company. The Director of the Opening Ceremony of the Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast and also in Melbourne. Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, ILBIJERRI, another Aboriginal Theatre Company. The Associate Artistic Director of Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney.

WL:

And he still hasn't stopped.

WE:

I'm on the board at the moment of NAISDA (Dance College), on the Australia Council's Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander First Nations Arts Strategy Panel. Chair of the New South Wales Aboriginal Arts and Culture panel. Director of the Anna Miller First Nations Foundation. Ahhhh....

WL:

See what I mean?

WE:

I have like, my diary is mad, because I have to just keep calculating how much time I'm spending on what to make sure...I'm giving them what they need.

WL:

Wesley moved home to Queensland this past March. He bought a house on Minjerrabah, North Stradbroke Island, so he could uphold the legacy of his Aunt Kath back on Quandamooka Country. And he started a new job at the Queensland University of Technology, but we'll hear more about that later. Because first, to understand how Wesley accomplished all that he has in his 52 years, we have to go back. Back to the '70s and '80s.

MUSIC

WL:

Wesley Enoch spent the first few years of his life on Minjerrabah. His mother, a white woman, grew up in Inala, in South-West Brisbane. His Aboriginal father, a Noonuccal Nuugi man, grew up on Minjerrabah. By the time his parents were 25 years old, they had 4 children. The family moved off Minjerrabah when Wesley was four and settled into Woodridge, south of Brisbane.

Wesley was quite a violent kid in primary school, he'd even thrown a chair in class. But all that changed when he went to high school and met kids who were into the arts.

WE:

I got involved in the school musical because I had a big mouth. And there was this sense of, "Oh well, you can play this role or narrate this thing or whatever. And so that kind of fed that interest. I also knew that I was on a path, I was on a path of destruction, that down that route, I don't know, maybe something terrible would have happened. And so this whole idea of going, "Actually, I need to take stock of myself and think about something, a different way of going." And so there was a

fork in the road: go down the destructive route or the constructive route. And I chose the one where I expressed myself and got engaged in the world, not disengaged.

WL:

Wesley went from troubled young boy to high-achieving high school student. His parents left the house for work by 5am, so Wesley got to school early, at quarter to 7am. The cleaners would let him in, and he'd study with a friend.

Wesley's love for theatre grew and with it came this strong desire to go to university. He decided he wanted to become a drama and dance teacher. He figured that was something he could realistically achieve. So he wrote out a five-year plan and was determined to stick to it.

Little did he know that there were people out there with other plans for him.

MUSIC

WL:

Wesley graduates high school and starts his degree at QUT, the Queensland University of Technology at Kelvin Grove in inner Brisbane. If you'd run into him on campus at the time, you probably would have seen him in some very '80s get up. He remembers this pale yellow shirt he'd wear sometimes...

WE:

... Like pastel pressed-stud shirt with this thin knitted white tie, and I was wearing three digital watches. And going yeah, yeah, showing off with a middle part. Remember, Ralph Macchio in *Eight is Enough*, this TV show - and I think I had a crush on him really - and he had a middle part. And so I parted my hair just like him.

WL:

Wesley fell into a group of Indigenous students, studying drama just like him. There were about 20 of them. His sister, Leanne Enoch - now a Queensland MP - was studying at QUT at the time too. They were the first in their family to ever attend university.

WE:

And so that made a huge difference, that it wasn't just you by yourself. You were there with others. We just had each other's back, you know?

WL:

One day, when Wesley was doing one of his favourite things – telling other people what to do, or maybe ‘directing’ people is probably the nicer way to put it – he meets someone who would become one of the most important people in his life: Deborah Mailman.

WE:

I was running orientation camp. That’s what, there's a theme here – I run everything, I make things happen. But here's this Aboriginal girl and I'd met her quickly, the shy girl in the corner. And we were doing these activities, and then something happened and she smiled. And I went, “Ah, that's what – that's the thing.” There's something about her inner glow and beauty.

WL:

For those of you who don’t know Deborah Mailman, she’s the first Aboriginal woman to win best actress at the Australian Film Institute Awards. Deborah starred in *The Sapphires*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the show *Offspring*, *Mystery Road*, and most recently, *Total Control*. But before she became a huge star, she was a drama student, a couple of years below Wesley.

WE:

I think that there's certain people in the world I say, I love them, I fell in love with them. And Deborah's one of them, you know, in a different world we would have children together. There's a kind of sense that our lives together will always be intertwined.

WL:

So they’re studying at QUT together, where Wesley was on track to become a teacher. And he was happy with this plan of his. He’d get a job at a local school somewhere and that’d be that, but some of his lecturers weren’t so sure. There was something about Wesley that told them he wasn’t supposed to go down that path, that he had a different purpose, that he shouldn’t just ignore possibilities just because of some five-year plan he wrote in high school. But for Wesley, that plan was the only one he believed he could realistically pull off. He simply couldn’t imagine anything grander.

He does his Honours and is keen to get cracking on his Diploma of Education. So he fills out the paperwork to apply for the program and goes to show his lecturers.

WE:

And I remember them ripping up my application in front of me and saying, “You don't need to do this, go out and see what happens in the world.”

WL:

Wesley didn't know what else was out there for him, but he took their advice and held off on the teaching diploma. He says this was the beginning of a pattern that would continue many years into his career. This willingness to trust the ideas that other people have for him.

WE:

I think others have always seen more in me than I have seen in myself. Not that I lack ambition, I've got ambition. But I think people always see opportunities for me, in a way, and they open doors. I've never really been good at opening my own doors, to be honest.

WL:

Trusting the wisdom of his mentors to put his teaching plan on ice was one thing, but it was what he did after that that changed his life - his career path - forever. Not even a month after his lecturer tore up that application, Wesley had a new job: a traineeship at this youth theatre company called Contact. He was 22 years old.

Contact Youth Theatre had a strong social justice aim. At its inception, Contact's purpose was to provide a space for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community within the company and provide training and employment opportunities.

WE:

And I was working in prisons, in regional communities, isolated Aboriginal communities, and building shows which were about reconciliation, before we even had the word reconciliation. It was about white and black working together and how important that was.

WL:

One day, Wesley went over to the John Oxley Youth Detention Centre to work with some kids there.

WL:

And this terrible thing where you walk in and they lock you in. And mostly working with Aboriginal kids. And these are kids in their, they were in their early teens, or even 11 or 12. And they had such behavioral issues. And I remember talking to an Elder about it saying, "What's wrong with these kids? What do I need to do?" And they said, "They're not kids, they're little adults. They're people who've grown up too fast." And I went, "Okay!" So we did this thing, where together, we built a cubby house, just out of sheets and pieces of paper and all that, and pegs and rope. And we built this cubby house, and we got inside. And the kids were really excited by it.

WL:

So the kids and Wesley are sitting close together in their little fort. And Wesley suggests they each tell a story that someone in their family had shared with them.

WL:

And then they said, "Oh, we didn't know any of those things, but I'll tell you that my crime got onto the second page, or the third page of *The Courier-Mail*. Oh, I made it on the television." You know, about absconding from police, about burning a place down, throwing rocks at cars... I mean, they were misdemeanors, but there was a sense of, they were a call for attention - they were asking the world to see them, because they just were not being seen. And I realised the power of storytelling for these kids, that the validation they got by having their crime acknowledged by the general public was a big thing for them. These kids have been maybe neglected by their parents, or their guardians and not been going to school. And so this pathway, this fork in the road that I had seen when I was a kid, you know, I saw it being played out.

And I went, "Oh, wouldn't it be more interesting if they had more constructive ways of seeing their story?" And so, we started writing plays at that point, you know, I'd say, "How do we make sure these kids can see their life on stage?"

WL:

This was a huge turning point for Wesley. He was finally seeing how he could use his art - use theatre - to affect social change. Just like his family before him, his own path to that intersection of art and activism was becoming illuminated.

WE:

I remember my Aboriginal grandmother said to me, she said, "You know, there's lots of ways of teaching, there's lots of ways of practicing the law, there's lots of ways of healing. So find your own way of doing it. You know, you don't have to be a teacher or a doctor or a lawyer, you can actually find your own way." And telling stories was my way of healing myself. So how could that be useful to others?

MUSIC

WL:

And after a while, he could see for himself just how much his work was influencing the futures of the kids in the program.

WE:

And I remember one particular moment, I was talking to this girl, and I go, "Where do I know you from?" And she was the eldest daughter of one of my cousins. And I was going, "Oh, so you're this person." And she was going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." And I went, "Ohhh." And so I would go back and visit her on a regular basis. And I remember afterwards, the officers, the people running the place, said that their analysis of that particular girl, and a lot of the kids in the core group that I was working with, they said, they think that they will not reoffend, they've found something new: a connection, a way of connecting. And not to say that it was just the work I was doing. But there was something about their confidence in themselves that meant that those professionals felt that these kids were on a different path now. And I thought, "Oh, well, that's a job well done."

WL:

They could see another...

WE:

An alternative - an alternative way of being that actually positioned them in a way that was empowered. And that was important.

WL:

Coming up after the break, Wesley begins to see his potential for a career outside the walls of the classroom.

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MUSIC

WL:

So Wesley is working at Contact Youth Theatre and in 1993, he gets his first professional acting role in a musical play about the life of his Aunt Kath, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the educator, poet and activist who inspires him immeasurably.

And who was with him on stage? His friend Deborah Mailman. Deborah and Wesley had been talking about setting up an all-Indigenous theatre company together, that would tell Indigenous stories. And their experience working on the play about his Aunt, called *One Woman's Song*, reinforced to them why establishing a First Nations-run theatre company was imperative to tell these stories.

WE:

And I remember this non-Indigenous director was directing and Aunty Kath leaned across, and she said, you know, "We should do it our way too," which was a real kind of support to kind of push it along.

WL:

And so, they did. Through Contact Youth Theatre they incorporated a performing arts company called Kooemba Jdarra, meaning "Sweet Water" or "Good Ground" in the Turrabul language. Wesley had well and truly diverged from that five-year plan of his. He wasn't teaching theatre; he was creating it.

MUSIC

WL:

And he credits his time at Contact for allowing him to see the power storytelling and art making can have in communities across Brisbane and beyond.

WE:

That experience helped me think, "Actually, that's a microcosm of a much bigger world." You know, where there are, not just kids, but adults who are feeling that. That they feel lost or not seen, or who are playing out, or who don't feel validated in society. And then you start to create these narratives and stories on stage, how they just come out of the woodwork and just, people come to the theater because they feel this hunger to see themselves.

WL:

So it's 1993. Wesley is 24, Deborah is 22, and they decide they should write something together, maybe a play that combines politics and art. But before they could figure out what their play was going to be about, something very sad happens in Wesley's personal life.

His Aboriginal grandmother, on his dad's side, dies. So Wesley leaves the city and goes to stay on Minjerrabah for a while, to grieve with his family. The slow pace of the island, the quiet, gave him time to reflect, and ultimately motivates Wesley to start writing some things down. He pours his anguish over the loss of his grandmother into an idea that he takes to Deborah.

WE:

I was saying to Deb, this is the experience that we're going through and what they're grieving. And we both said, "Oh, there's something in this, let's have a look." And that's when we came to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and the Five Stages of Dying in this, this idea of Aboriginal history being a grieving process, and off we went.

WL:

Wesley went back to Brisbane and got to work with Deborah. They collaborated out of the Kooemba Jdarra offices inside Metro Arts, which was on Edward Street in the city until recently.

WE:

And there was one particular room that Malcolm Jagamarra had done this big mural, Milkyway mural, and we'd go in there, and we'd just, you know, be surrounded by art. This big, beautiful mural on the wall. And, you know, just be inspired by it. And this old building with its old floorboards, and its beams, and falling apart sometimes. But the sense of kind of history, which is very important too.

WL:

He and Deborah could feel that history inside the walls of Metro Arts. And it wasn't a linear history, that Western idea of time.

WE:

A lot of Indigenous cultures don't think of that as wall. They think that place is the continuity, and that time has just layered up on place. And so this idea of sitting in a room that was an old wool store, and bits and pieces of things have been traded, and all that kind of stuff in there. And just keep thinking about the layering up. And you can connect to that history, can connect to that sense of time, because you're walking in the footsteps of those who've gone before. And so, you walk through Brisbane and you go, actually this is millennia old.

WL:

So inside the Kooemba Jdarra office at Metro Arts, Wesley and Deborah are writing this play together. This play that would star Deborah and only Deborah. A one-woman show that takes Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' Five Stages model and puts it into the context of the seven phases of Aboriginal history: Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-Determination, and Reconciliation. They named it *The 7 Stages of Grieving*.

Creating this work was an exercise in fortitude, for both of them.

WE:

Deb made me better at what I did because she would challenge me and confront me. And because we had this mutual respect for each other we could push each other further.

WL:

One afternoon, they were working on this scene for *The 7 Stages of Grieving*. Wesley directing, Deborah performing. It was this long scene, heavy on the words, and it just wasn't working.

WE:

And we realised that the words were just useless, and she kept saying, "Is that because I'm not doing them properly?" "No, no, I don't think so."

WL:

Deborah's such a natural improviser, they decided to try the scene without the script. Stripping everything away and improvising with just physical action.

WE:

And what was great is that by questioning each other, back and forward, we actually got one of the, I think one of the best scenes ever, where we're talking about the Stolen Generations. And not, we're not talking about Stolen Generations specifically, we're telling it is as a as a story being drawn out in the dirt. It was one of those revelations where we said, "For Indigenous Australians, our storytelling isn't just words - it's action. And it's music and song. Its dance. It's visuals, it's painting.

WL:

The result is an incredibly arresting piece of art.

Fast forward to opening night, September 13th, 1995. The audience takes their seats inside Metro Arts, not sure what to expect. When the curtain gets pulled back, they see a large block of ice sitting on the stage, with seven ropes coming out of it. And a pile of red dirt.

For the first time, an audience is watching Deborah perform that long, powerful scene. In it, Deborah puts some of the red dirt in the centre of the stage and says, "This is life and culture."

WE:

Then she puts eight little piles around and saying, "This is family." And then she tries to explain, from her memory, the moieties, the skin connections and how different groups can marry into different groups.

WL:

And then halfway through Deborah's character appears to forget and says, "Oh wait, I've got that wrong. Oh actually, maybe this is how it works."

WE:

And she keeps saying, "Are you with me? Are you with me?" And the audience now say, "Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. We're with you," as you're trying to explain how complex it is.

WL:

Then she takes those smaller piles, the ones around the central pile, away.

WE:

And says, "Now imagine if the children are taken away from this." And she puts that pile somewhere else. And there's a sense of, "Yes. How do you understand this complexity of family connection if you don't grow up with it, if you don't know where you fit in it?" And the final images, she says to the audience, "Are you with me?" And they're breathless, and she just wipes away the dirt and flings it across and destroys the image that she's put there. And this, I remember the very guttural sound that the audience would make this kind of, "Ahhhhh!" This idea of going, "I now totally understand what that means."

MUSIC

WL:

The play draws to a close.

WE:

And at the end of it, Deborah's dirty with dirt and mess and all that kind of stuff. And she goes off and gets cleaned and comes back. And the final thing she says is "Nothing, nothing. I feel nothing." This idea of, "Is that relief? Or is that actually emptiness? What does that mean?" And the lights go out and there's this moment of silence. And you go, "Oh. I wonder what the audience thought of that." And then you hear it, the applause starts and...

WL:

The lights come up on Deborah and the audience jumps to their feet.

WE:

And we didn't know what we had, you know, yes, we're arrogant young people. But we didn't know what was going on.

WL:

And then, at that moment, as the audience is clapping, perhaps understanding what a revolutionary play it was going to become, an Elder comes out into the central stairway and starts walking down to the stage.

WE:

And Deb was kind of looking at her, like a bit shocked. And this Elder goes down and comes in and just grabs her and hugs her - tears rolling down her face. And they're hugging there. And I don't know what they even said, but there's a sense of, you know, "Thank you", and a really beautiful thing, and the whole audience is just alive with what had happened.

MUSIC

WL:

The following year, *The 7 Stages of Grieving* toured around Australia. After that, it toured internationally. It's been turned into a book. It's studied in schools. And has been performed on stage numerous times over the past 26 years. In fact, an updated version of the play just wrapped up in Sydney. Deborah Mailman is now a household name. And Wesley went on to write and direct more

productions that gave Indigenous voices and stories their deserved prominence. And he's used his platform to advocate for not only Indigenous representation, but Indigenous self-determination too.

After living in Paris, Melbourne and Sydney, Wesley recently moved back home to Brisbane, to Minjerribah, North Stradbroke Island. He's happy to be back to the one place he says he can really predict the weather, where you can't avoid the flora and fauna, where nature just keeps talking to you all the time.

WE:

You know, the fecundity of plants. And I love it. It's uncontrollable. All you can do is hope. I had this bougainvillea when I was living in Milton once, and it was this big pink thing that, you know, would just take over! And I ended up calling it the British Empire because it had, you know, the pinkness of the British Empire on the maps. And I'd just say to my partner, "I'm gonna go hack out the British Empire and go down the back and kind of cut it down." And I love that sense of getting involved in what the landscape's doing.

WL:

Wesley's back where it all kinda began, the Queensland University of Technology. He took a newly created role as the Indigenous Chair in the Creative Industries. And he's starting to think about his legacy.

Wesley is the kind of man who is constantly asking questions – of himself, of the world around him – and is constantly refining and reflecting, trying to figure out what more he can do to contribute to the world. He doesn't drink alcohol or coffee; he's still an action man. He mulls on ideas and makes things happen. And he's been thinking about his work at Contact, about young people, how so many of them have these unfair struggles to overcome. Like these boulders in their path to success. And how some of those boulders shouldn't be boulders at all. They should be pebbles.

WE:

I remember talking to some Elders about why these kids were potentially truanting, not going to school. And it was because the washing machine had broken down in the house, and no one had money to fix it. And so, the uniforms were dirty, and the parents didn't want to send the kids to school because if they weren't wearing the uniforms they'd get in trouble and get shame. And perhaps the kids would be taken away from them. And you start to go, "Oh my God, all over a bloody fan belt on a washing machine! Can we just sort that out?"

WL:

Sometimes he wonders if he made the right choice, not becoming a teacher.

WE:

And sometimes I question myself too around, why theater? Why work in the arts? Why aren't you in housing, or education, or? And that whole idea of what motivates me is that big change stuff. How do I also influence the world? How do I make sure the world is ready to receive these unique, interesting voices? And that's what I need to do: change the world, and actually make sure these young people are resilient enough to tackle the world.

WL:

Wesley has kinda come full circle. He's back working with, and for, younger generations.

WE:

People open doors for me. I want to be there putting up the welcome mat and open doors for them.

WL:

Doing what his mentors did for him, way back when.

END

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Special thanks to Louise Martin-Chew and to Dylan Ransom-Hughes for doing the final mix on all of these episodes.

Where I Belong is written and produced on Turrabul and Yaggera land by me, Wendy Love. Museum of Brisbane acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land and pays its respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

If you like what you heard please share it with your friends and be sure to listen to the rest of the episodes of *Where I Belong*.