

AILEEN CORPUS: USING THEATRE TO REUNITE THE PEOPLE

Aileen Corpus grew up on a mission at Darwin. There was a barbwire fence separating her and the part-Aborigines from the full-bloods. The two groups lived apart and went to different schools. Today she is trying to use the theatre and her talent as an actress to reunite the people by breaking down the barriers which decades of separation have placed between different Aboriginal groups.

"It's necessary", she says, "to have black theatre as a teaching avenue for black people—by presenting their hassles on stage, by making them aware of their black pride and identity. In Sydney the people are united, whereas in Darwin there's discrimination between coloureds and blacks and the people are disunited. Black theatre in Darwin shouldn't be for white audiences. It should be for blacks and be about the sort of life they know."

For much of her life Aileen unquestioningly accepted the inference that there was a difference between full-blood people and part-Aborigines. "Everybody accepted this sort of situation as the normal thing", she says. "Nobody in Darwin wants to even talk about anything". It was only after coming to Sydney that she accepted and began to take pride in her Aboriginality.

"I never thought of myself as an Aboriginal", she says. "When I came to high school in Sydney, apparently the kids had been forewarned that there was an Aboriginal coming down from the Northern Territory to go to their school. They'd ask me questions about the Aboriginal way of life. I'd say I'm not an Aboriginal and get stuck into them. They just couldn't understand that I'd refuse to accept the fact that I was an Aboriginal. This was the attitude of all the people from the Territory who were part-Aboriginal.

Stumbling block

"We were classified as coloureds and given the full status of an Australian citizen—allowed to go to ordinary government schools, and so on. In fact we mixed pretty freely with the white community. There was little or no difference. When I say



Aileen Corpus

(Photo courtesy *Woman's Day*)

'little' I mean they really stepped in to educate these poor little half-breeds. And now it's a great stumbling block towards uniting the race".

Despite the separation between the two groups Aileen says that as a child she "used to be intrigued by the Aborigines. Every Sunday night the residents of Bagot Reserve would have a corroboree", she says, "and all of us kids would try and sneak under the barbwire fence and go down and watch".

It was not until 1970, 6 years after she had gone there, when she began to meet some of the younger spokesmen in the Sydney Aboriginal community, that Aileen began to think of herself as Aboriginal. "I still regarded myself as a coloured person", she says. "Although I did call the Aborigines from this State Aborigines, I refused to call myself one. I couldn't stop giggling at the idea of myself being an Aboriginal. Then I realized I wasn't white, although I never wanted to be white. I didn't want to be black or white. I just wanted to be in the middle, to be coloured. I used to fight with the Sydney people all the time over this".

Identity was only one of the problems she faced in Sydney. At school she encountered reverse discrimination, which can be just as painful as the more common variety. "The teachers just didn't treat me like a person, but like a little protege", she says. "This used to make me sick. I wanted to leave school half-way through fourth form. But I had all the teachers and school councillors coming around and saying how great it was having an Aboriginal going for the School Certificate, how my people were looking to me and so on. I just