

Play highlights rock art rage

As industry threatens to do further damage to a Pandora's box of human history on the Burrup Peninsula **David Milroy** puts pen to paper in opposition...

By **Ben Cranston and Stephen Bevis**

BURRUP rock art has been thrust into the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts spotlight as Perth audiences grapple with famed indigenous writer David Milroy's latest outpouring of anger.

Swine River often batters the audience with a giant message stick but at times director Rick Brayford achieves genuinely moving moments from his Aboriginal Theatre Group.

He told the Pilbara News about Milroy's latest, highly politicised, work and his students' adaptation which recently drew to a close.

"We need all the help we can get with this (indigenous theatre) group," Brayford said.

"Each year the results and out-

comes are even better."

He was genuinely passionate about his class, as mentor for these raw, young performers who he was charged with turning into professional, paid actors.

This short play started as a six-page draft less than two months ago as Milroy sought to vent his frustration about the destruction of rock art on the Burrup and the decision by Arts and Aboriginal Affairs Minister Sheila McHale to allow a railway line through the Abydos Woodstock Reserve.

That draft has been worked up into a performance through workshops involving Milroy, Brayford and the students.

Though not yet perfected, it provided a vital development tool for the students.

"You can't perform any play with-

out going back and fully researching the background and issues behind the work," Brayford said.

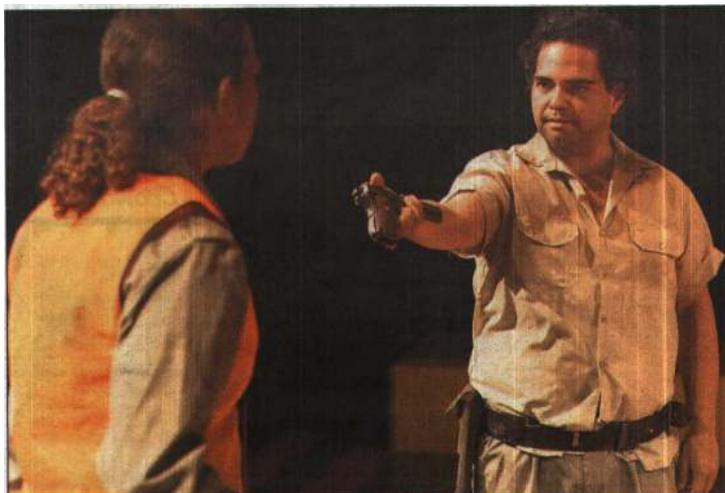
"You have to get it right when it's happening right now.

"You would do the same type of research for every play."

The Aboriginal Theatre Group researched the relevant native title issues going back a year or more to become imbedded in the consciousness Milroy put pen to paper with.

They needed to install themselves in his quest for wrongs to be made right – comprehending his motives for shaping Swine River.

As Aboriginal people, the group were well aware of issues affecting indigenous people and furnished with the necessary skills of theatre and stagecraft to ram their message home.



Reneae Simpson, back of, and Sheldon Covich. Pictures by Jon Green

But they will become more than just a billboard for indigenous issues.

"Part of their training is skilling them up and getting them ready with the techniques and crafts for the different types of thing they are going to be asked to do," Brayford said.

"They can communicate with the cutting edge of the black and white interface."

But as actors looking for work in a competitive theatre economy the group did not want to perform just indigenous roles in indigenous

works.

"They relate easier to that world but if that is all they know then you are culling down your potential work by about 80 per cent," he said.

"They need to know the (indigenous) classics like Jack Davis and Bob Mazza but much more than that."

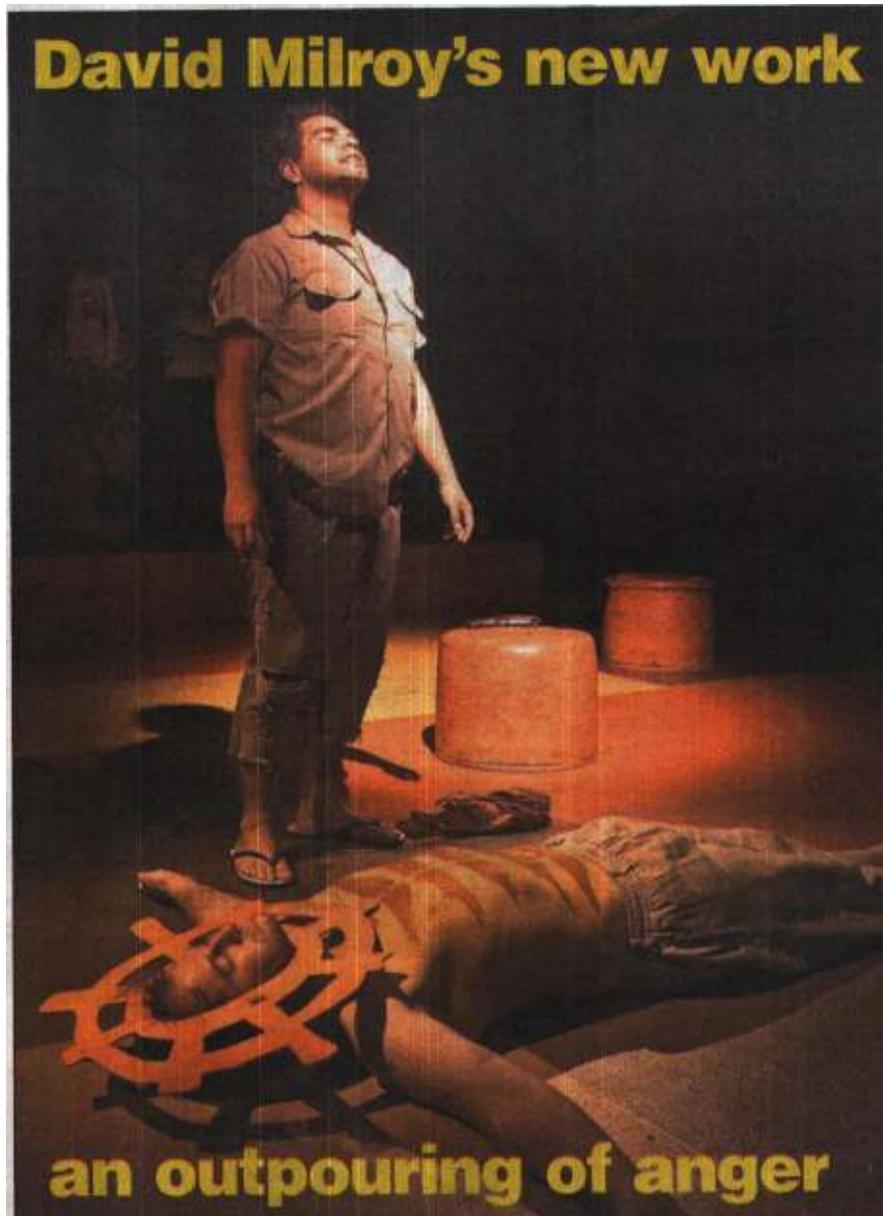
The play begins with an executioner and his young trainee debating the protocols of dispatching an Aboriginal man, Yarri Snow, who is to be terminated from a mining tenement as sanctioned under law in the

State of Mining circa 2018.

When the execution goes wrong, the action transfers to a courtroom, in which questions of heritage, culture and progress and power are thrashed out.

His play looks at the way ancient heritage and contemporary cultural concerns can be ultimately weighed up against economic progress.

"Iron ore dreaming is the only dreaming allowed," the prosecutor says.



Fred Nunn, lying down, and Sheldon Covich.