Warrior's language of resistance

*Aboriginal insurgent Jandamarra and the words of his tribe are being brought to life on stage, **Victoria Laurie** reports*

Still going strong: Linguists June Oscar and Patsy Bedford with playwright Steve Hawke

LIKE living, beating organs, two words and a phrase in the Bunuba language lie at the heart of *Jandamarra*, a new play about a real-life Kimberley warrior. Words for country, language and the notion of endurance underpin the epic story of this Aboriginal hero, which premieres next week in a Black Swan Theatre production at the Perth International Arts Festival.

Bunuba linguist and Fitzroy Crossing community leader June Oscar, who helped translate the play's script into her native Kimberley language, writes each word with a teacher's clarity on a piece of paper. "One word is *muwayi*, home or country, another is *thangani* or language," she explains.

"The phrase is '*Burrudi yatharra thirrili ngarri*', meaning 'We are still here and strong'. That's what Jandamarra was," Oscar declares, passing the paper over. "He lived that and he showed the white man that."

Oscar and her linguist colleague Patsy Bedford are sitting in a Perth restaurant near where *Jandamarra* is being rehearsed. With them is Steve Hawke, the writer who shaped their community's oral history into a dramatised account of the 1890s Aboriginal rebel who eluded police and white pastoralists in the rugged cave country of the west Kimberley.

In historical shorthand, Jandamarra was a kind of Aboriginal Ned Kelly. A police tracker who dutifully betrayed his own people, he suddenly changed sides. He killed a policeman, released Bunuba prisoners from their neck chains and played hide-and-seek with his pursuers for nearly three years. He even raided police stations left unattended by troopers who were supposedly hot on his heels.

In Aboriginal parlance, he was a *jalgangurru* or spiritual man who could disappear, transform into a bird and shield himself from deadly weapons. He represented invincibility against white invaders, but it didn't last: in 1897, at age 23, Jandamarra was cornered and shot dead.

His exploits have been handed down in "whitefella" narrative as well as in Aboriginal oral tradition. Popular Kimberley novelist Ion Idriess wrote *Outlaw of the Leopolds* about him, while singer-songwriter Paul Kelly penned *Pigeon-Jundamurra*. Kelly is now the play's musical director and has spent time between tours in Perth working on the play this month.

Jandamarra is a big theatrical event in several ways: large cast, huge 10m high stage set and an epic tale that Hawke has worked on for nearly two decades.

"I passionately love the Jandamarra story," he says. "It is the archetypal Australian story, magnificent on many levels but inherently difficult to get up. It's hugely expensive (to tell) and it's owned by the Bunuba mob."

That ownership was established in 1984, when Hawke and a group of Aboriginal elders formed Bunuba Productions to make a feature film about Jandamarra. Several times they came tantalisingly close to finding backers for a film, even attracting the interest of Mel Gibson.

But it was only when Black Swan Theatre Company expressed interest in 2005 that a full script — in Bunuba, English and Kimberley kriol — began to take shape and a date was set for a stage version. Black Swan's Tom Gutteridge is directing the play, and Torres Strait Islander actor Jimi Bani (who appeared in ABC TV's series *RAN*) will play Jandamarra opposite Kimberley-born actor Ningali Lawford-Wolf as his mother.

Other pieces have fallen neatly into place. Several Fitzroy Crossing people with close links to the Jandamarra legend, such as musician-actor Danny Marr, will perform in the play. Marr's niece Kaylene Marr, whose father was a founding member of Bunuba Productions, has produced vivid drawings that have been animated and form part of the stage design.

An important song and dance cycle, the *Yilimbirri Junba*, will be performed with the play for the first time outside the Kimberley by Bunuba lawmen, singers and dancers.

Hawke has spent years adapting the Jandamarra story for film and now stage, sifting through conflicting accounts of his exploits. "There isn't a single Aboriginal version of the Jandamarra story," he says. "He's known to Aboriginal people throughout the Kimberley and different people tell the story different ways. (This version) is one I've worked on with the Bunuba people. Every draft of the script I've written over the years has been read, agreed to and changed by these people."

Hawke, Oscar and Bedford clearly have an easy, trusting relationship. They've known each other since 1978, when then 19-year-old Hawke, son of former prime minister Bob Hawke, deferred his studies at the University of Melbourne to go north and help in the Noonkanbah land rights dispute, near Fitzroy Crossing.

"June and I go back a long way," Hawke says. "I did a lot of work with Bunuba people long before I got involved in the Jandamarra story." He ran native title claims and helped set up local organisations, but ultimately left the Kimberley and now writes for a living in Perth.

Says Oscar: "It certainly has helped us, and Steve as a writer, that he's drawn from that personal life experience, relationships and journeys that he's had with Bunuba people."

Above all, says Oscar, Hawke has understood the cultural and linguistic imperatives surrounding the making of the play. The cattle country that Jandamarra roamed was plagued with brutal black-white clashes; today, Fitzroy Crossing has been afflicted by youth suicides and alcoholism, and subjected to a harrowing coronial inquest.

Oscar, who is the wife of reconciliation spokesman Pat Dodson, is a prominent community leader who has fought hard to restrict alcohol sales in Fitzroy Crossing. Her most Herculean effort — and that of Bedford, who has nearly completed the first comprehensive Bunuba dictionary — has been keeping language and culture alive. Together, the two women help run the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, which has pioneered the recording and teaching of the region's languages.

"White linguists would describe Bunuba as an endangered language, since any language with less than 2000 speakers is considered endangered," Oscar says. "But from our perspective, it's very much alive. We're alive and we're using it and for as long as we're teaching our future generations, it'll live on."

That's why it was considered so important that when the character of Jandamarra speaks, he uses Bunuba as well as English (which the real Jandamarra learned as a boy stockman on a station).

"Inclusion of language in this project is right at the core of this story," Oscar says. "Without the language, this story could not be told or the message relayed in the way that it should."

It took the women hundreds of hours to arrive at the right translations. "We both work full-time, we've got families and old people to look after," Oscar says.

There were unexpected rewards. For five days last year, Oscar and Bedford took all the cast members out bush at Fitzroy Crossing, pointing out animals and plants, walking along riverbanks, living the language instead of rote-teaching it in a classroom.

Another bonus was hearing once-lost Bunuba words resurface in the minds of Fitzroy's most senior native speakers. "People like my mother, Mona Oscar, have been helped to remember, or going back and finding the right word," Oscar says. "To say 'I am a hunter', as Jandamarra did, is '*Ngayini milhalba*'. We hadn't really heard that phrase used before."

"At first I just assumed we couldn't do Jandamarra in language on stage," Hawke admits. "It never even occurred to me, quite honestly. But at the very first workshop in early 2006, Tom and others were talking about a scene and someone said 'Well couldn't we actually do it in Bunuba?' And Tom said, 'Why not? We could have surtitles like they do in opera.'

"The translation process has been some of the most enjoyable work I've ever done," he continues. "It's such a stimulating intellectual exercise. But it's also been a dramaturgical exercise because I'd explain the dramatic intent and they'd come up with another way of saying that in Bunuba, which ends up with a completely different feel to what I originally wrote in English. It's added to the play enormously."

Another tricky area was using artistic licence in a story "owned" by the community. Hawke says he had to imagine unrecorded aspects of the story, and would write up two or three versions of what might have happened. "Someone might then say, 'Nah, that's not going to work, that's too far-fetched.' "

Some dramatic liberties had to be allowed in order to hang the play's structure together. "The thing that unlocked the way for me was trying to understand why Jandamarra shot (policeman) Richardson and changed sides back to his own people," Hawke says.

"I actually came up with a reading of that central event. All versions of the story — Bunuba oral history, Idriess, all of them — say many Bunuba men were rounded up at one time, which is when he shoots Richardson, releases them and unleashes this long guerilla war. But how come all of those senior Bunuba men finished up on a chain at the same time?

"I reckon — and this is how the play tells it — that it was a deliberate strategy. Basically the Bunuba were being decimated, they were on the verge of being wiped out as a free people and Jandamarra was the main agent of that. So the Bunuba people let themselves be caught and forced him to make a choice. It was a do-or-die gamble, basically."

Oscar thinks that's plausible. "While there's huge artistic licence there, Steve's influenced by his long association with Bunuba people and the many situations where he couldn't help but think that it was a deliberate strategy."

A lot will be riding on the play's success, not least Hawke's hope that *Jandamarra* may yet be made into a feature film. For Bedford, the joy has been in hearing the story of her country told in her language. "This has been the dream of the old people."

For Oscar, the phrase, "We're still here and still strong", is a message Fitzroy residents need to hear as they await the findings of the coroner. "Jandamarra is about the stories shared with us by people who are no longer here, or only in spirit," she says. "It's about how we have lived as Bunuba people and chosen to bring that uniqueness into the telling of this story."

Jandamarra runs at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre from February 9 to 23.

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Ignorance is bliss, but the dark side has such colour

*Students take the arts' nobility as gospel until they meet a heretic named Jean-Jacques, says **Laurie Fendrich***

I HAVE been teaching in undergraduate seminars the most provocative essay on the arts, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre* (1758). It is about the unintended effects of theatre — which, for Rousseau, stands in for all the arts — on an audience.

The essay is an impassioned rebuttal of the 1757 entry on Geneva, written by Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, in the huge Enlightenment project *Encyclopedie*, in which d'Alembert says Geneva would be an even finer city if only it didn't have laws banning theatre. Rousseau says that, *au contraire*, theatre would actually be harmful to the citizens of Calvinist Geneva, and tries to prove that the prohibition is a good thing.

To my students, Rousseau's astonishing position collides head-on with the television-drenched, movie-dependent, iPodified, grind-dancing world in which many of them spend a good part of their lives.

In studying Rousseau's essay, my students directly confront their stormy love affair with mass culture. They learn the extent to which their youthful values are already in deep conflict with one another.

In the *Letter*, Rousseau's preoccupation is with how to sustain virtue in the face of modernity. Virtue is a word that nearly all of my students initially choke on, as its contemporary meaning applies mostly to anachronistic notions of female chastity. None of them has thought much about virtue, but Rousseau, drawing inspiration from ancient Greek political philosophy, is deeply attached to the idea.

For him, virtue existed only in communities whose citizens knew how to put aside self-interest for the sake of the whole. The places where Rousseau could find virtue, alas, were confined to a few small, free republics scattered through history, such as ancient Sparta or 18th-century Geneva, and not in freewheeling metropolises such as Paris, awash in urban luxury. Rousseau's essay argues that the twin vices of vanity and competition, born when man left the "state of nature" and formed societies, inevitably destroy virtue and happiness.

Rousseau, the Enlightenment's party pooper, shocks students by trashing education and reason, science and art, and the advancement of knowledge in general. Most students have come to college at least partly to "make themselves better". Rousseau seems to be telling them not to fool themselves. Their real motives, he implies, are vanity and ambition. And nothing fuels those two vices, Rousseau says, like the arts.

Although my students readily concede Rousseau's initial premises that theatre's purpose is to entertain (that is, to give pleasure) and that it is a luxury rather than a necessity, they have a hard time accepting the possibility it might be truly deleterious.

But the pleasure theatre provides, Rousseau argues, is based on the display of unruly passions, and it's addictive: almost everyone who encounters theatre wants more and more of it. Worse, Rousseau says, theatre "tends everywhere to promote and increase the inequality of fortunes" because it triggers a host of artificial desires. And even when theatre is great, and its audience consists of decent people, Rousseau argues, whether or not we're made better by it depends on who we are to begin with.

Many of us are made worse by theatre precisely because we're introduced to bad ideas we'd never thought of before. The modern media echoes Rousseau's claim regularly, especially after tragedies such as that at Virginia Tech in the US. Villains "accustom the eyes of the people to horrors that they ought not even to know and to crimes they ought not to suppose possible".

Theatre also engenders in us the fuzzy feeling that we become good people merely by watching other people, none of whom we know personally, pretending to be good or bad people on the stage and then identifying ourselves only with the good ones: "The continual emotion that is felt in the theatre excites us, enervates us, enfeebles us and makes us less able to resist our passions. And the sterile interest taken in virtue serves only to satisfy our vanity without obliging us to practise it."

In short, theatre's smoke and mirrors seduce us into substituting art for moral action. And even though theatre might keep unvirtuous people in big cities distracted and somewhat in check, Rousseau thinks it causes generally good people to become restless and unhappy with their own lives because it makes their own lives seem, by comparison, boring. The better theatre is, the more inherently debilitating it is to real life. In sum: theatre is slightly good only for bad people, and quite bad for good people.

This conclusion puts my students in a philosophical pickle, as they tend to be convinced by Rousseau's logic but still think of their theatre-liking selves as essentially good. They're good, they think, because they're reasonable people getting an education that will make them even more reasonable. But Rousseau, borrowing heavily from Plato, argues that reason, compared to the strong force of habit, is fairly weak in determining human behaviour.

Habits, Rousseau says, come from three sources: law, pleasure and the most powerful of all: public opinion. And habits are, by definition, resistant to change. Even the law is ineffective when it tries to get people to change their ways too rapidly. The best way to change ingrained habits lies in gently manipulating public opinion.

Now, most of my students have thought very little about either their habits, or habits in general. In closed societies of the kind Rousseau admired — small republics with strong censorship and active, virtuous citizens who know one another — every member of the community enforces the habits of every other member with spying eyes. My students see communities with spying eyes in terms either of wicked foreign theocracies or small, rural American towns. To them, lives lived in such communities seem boxed in, if not outright oppressed.

But Rousseau teaches the opposite, that these are good lives. Artists, with their vanity and longing for fame, have no business intruding in them. Their meddling — putting on plays, for example — can result only in destabilisation and destruction. Most of my students struggle hard over this idea. The idea that the opposite might be true — that art and science destroy the joy in many people by making their way of life seem stupid and unsophisticated — rattles everyone in the room.

It's a jungle: Jean-Jacques Rousseau would disapprove of the primal imagery in his namesake Henri Rousseau's *The Quay of Ivry*, 1908

My students can readily see that when Rousseau goes after theatre, he's also going after their movies, music and TV. He attacks most of their largely unexamined ideas: that small-town life is stultifying and big-city life is where it's at; that artists and intellectuals are superior to everybody else; that censorship is bad; and that art is uplifting and good for a society.

Most upsetting, Rousseau challenges them to look at their reasons for being in college. The platitude pounded into them since kindergarten suddenly seems meaningless. No matter how learned or artistically sophisticated we become, Rousseau teaches, we still have but a frail grasp of what it takes to be good or happy.

Most of my students end up reluctantly siding with Rousseau. His rhetorical passion for virtue, coupled with the fact that he follows up general observations with particular, well-chosen examples, can't easily be refuted. But siding with Rousseau leaves them incapable of justifying their lives.

To open the window to criticism of Rousseau, I point out what I see to be flaws in his argument: he ignores how small towns often wreak misery on good people who happen to be a bit different, which is why they hightail it to big cities. I raise the problem of how often good people have narrow minds.

There's no happy reconciliation of art and morals at the end of reading Rousseau, as there is in, say, Kant or Schiller. There's only a stark question: What do we choose, art or virtue?

My students sense that they face the moral job of finding the courage of their convictions, but their youthful intellectual blossoming confuses them about exactly what their convictions are. Rousseau teaches that reason and moral conviction are often in tension with each other, and that their reconciliation may not be possible.

Rousseau's overarching thesis is that people are good by nature but corrupted by society. My students like that, since it reassures them that it's not entirely their fault every time they do something bad, but rather some larger social force "made me do it". And Rousseau articulates the longings in my students for more of a reason to live than competing for who's the best-looking and smartest, or who ends up with the most toys.

Many students tell me that reading Rousseau makes them conscious of the fact that ineluctably fascinating human wrongdoing almost always trumps the dullness of virtue, and that people who cheerily trumpet art (especially that which showcases bad behaviour as entertainment) are blind to both art's power and its peril.

One of my former students recently wrote to me that he was glad he'd read *Letter to d'Alembert* because he'd learned from it that, in the end, he prefers being miserable and loving art to his earlier childhood state of being happy and ignorant of it. This student was clear, at least: He was choosing art over virtue.

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