

Item 3.2

Vale Jack Charles

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I wish to inform Council of the passing of Jack Charles, Aboriginal actor, author, artist and activist on 13 September 2022.

Jack was a Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta man and much loved and respected elder. He was also a stolen child. Around four months after his birth on 5 September 1943, he was taken from his mother to Melbourne City Mission and placed in the Salvation Army Boys' Home in Box Hill, a Melbourne suburb when he was two years old. He was the only Aboriginal boy. Apart from suffering oral cruelty about his skin colour, his family and race were "whitewashed", and along with other boys experienced sexual abuse.

At the age of 14 he was placed in a foster home and later gained an apprenticeship at a glass bevelling factory. It was a job and trade he really loved. Each payday he would take his pay packet home to his foster mother who would open it and dole out part of it to him.

A decision when he was almost 17 changed his life. Encouraged by others, he took a tram to Fitzroy hoping to find his mob. He later wrote in his memoir *Born Again Blakfella* "I jumped off the tram and set off in search of my culture, history and destiny.... Connecting to culture and kin would complete the wonderful stage I was finally at in my life, after the damage done in the home". Except he failed to tell his foster mother. He also opened his pay packet. Once in Fitzroy someone recognised him as Blanche Charles boy and someone else told him she was still alive and where she lived.

He returned home overjoyed, but he did not expect the cold reaction from his foster mother when he told her his good news. She sent him to his room, then called the police who took him to a youth detention centre. He was released and returned to work at the factory. He also began looking for his family, a not always happy experience. He has also connected with some mates from the boys' home, one of whom was engaged in petty crime. Jack, on his own admission, was easily led by him. His first attempt at burglary led to his being gaoled in Pentridge Prison.

Over the next three decades he was gaoled another 21 times for crimes related to heroin addiction and burglary. He later described his burglaries as "collecting the rent" for stolen Aboriginal land. The drugs "dulled the memories and pain" of his past, he later said. Often his time in gaol was interspersed with sleeping rough.

He had also discovered theatre. In 1970 a person from Melbourne's New Theatre came to the hostel where he was living looking for people who might be interested in acting. Jack volunteered and was cast in *Blood Knot* by South African playwright Athol Fugard. Other roles followed.

In 1971 Jack and actor Bob Maza founded Australia's first modern Black theatre company, Nindethana Theatre, in Melbourne. Their first production was the Cherry Pickers by Aboriginal playwright Kevin Gilbert, followed by a sketch-based work, Jack Charles Up and Fighting with Jack starring as himself.

It was the beginning of a stellar acting career. Initially Jack worked with several Melbourne companies, most notably the Pram Factory, where he was part of the original cast of its major hit, the Australian wedding play Dimboola. In 1975 he played Bennelong in the Michael Boddy's The Cradle of Hercules at Sydney Opera House.

Television and film followed, with appearances in Chant of Jimmie Black Smith, Blackfellas, Pan, Wolf Creek and the TV series Ben Hall, Women of the Sun, Clever Man, Mystery Road, The Gods of Wheat Street and Preppers. He will soon be seen on screen again in the independent Australian film Life After Man.

Jack's acting career was interspersed with periods in prison, spending his 20th, 30th, 40th and 50th birthdays behind bars. In Born Again Blackfella he describes gaol as a "place of respite" where he completed his secondary education and could indulge his love of reading. He also discovered a talent for writing and used it to compose letters for other prisoners to send to their wives. They rewarded him with tobacco and chocolate. During one prison stay he discovered pottery, a practice he found "meditative" and was eventually allowed to run a pottery workshop for other prisoners. During his last prison stint, he overcame his heroin addiction through the Marumali program, an evidence based, trauma and culturally informed healing program which provides support for Stolen Generations, their families and communities.

Jack's work as a mentor, activist and truth-teller is perhaps even significant than his theatre, film and television career. Together with musician Archie Roach he became a mentor for Aboriginal youth in the prison system. He was unsuccessful in realising his dream of realising what he called Nindabaya Workshops, safe places for Aboriginal people coming out of prison, with workshops, meeting spaces and pottery studios. Openly gay, he was role model for LGBTQIA+ Aboriginal youth, encouraging them to be true to themselves.

His greatest impact was through his willingness to share his own story, through live performance, film and television putting a human face to the impacts of the inhumane policies that created the stolen generations. His one-man show, Jack Charles v The Crown toured across Australia and internationally for eight years after first being staged at the Melbourne Festival in 2010. In 2019, he toured another one man show, A Night With Jack Charles, in which he talked about his life as a gay, Aboriginal man. Earlier this year he was the first Indigenous Elder to address Victoria's Yoorrook Justice Commission at its truth-telling public hearings.

In Born Again Blackfella he wrote: "My story is about connections. Connections to my countrymen and global communities, connections to performance and the arts, connections with workers in the drug and alcohol support sector, needle syringe workers, country, kinship, culture and Aboriginality."

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Jack Charles and his significant contribution to the arts, activism, understanding and truth-telling;
- (B) Council express its condolences to Jack Charles' family; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to convey Council's condolences to Jack's family.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor