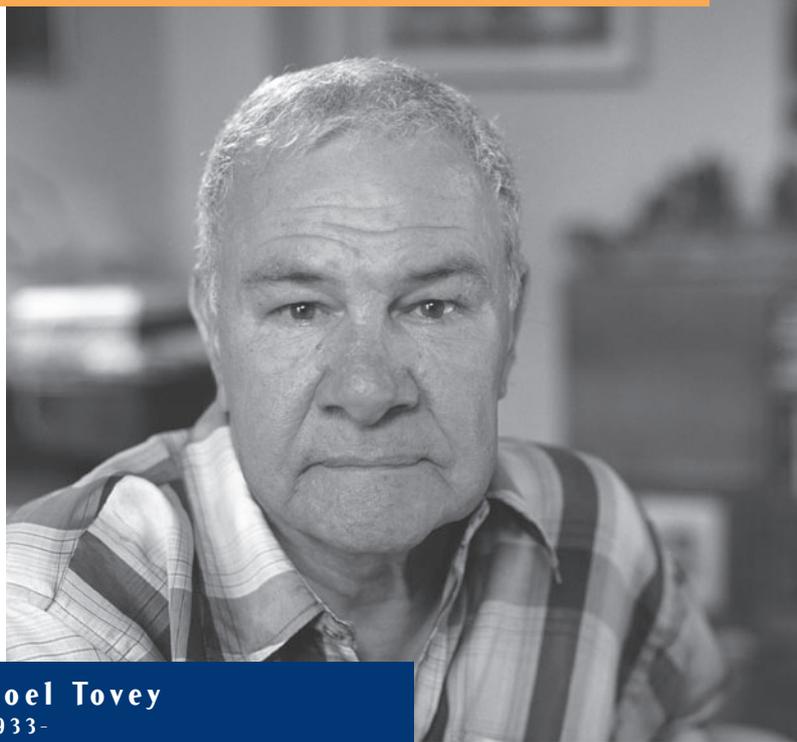


AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Noel Tovey

1933-

Actor, Director, Choreographer

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 10 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Noel Tovey

Director/producer Rod Freedman

Executive producer Mark Hamlyn

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 2005

Study guide © NFSA

Also in Series 10: Tom Bass, Noeline Brown, Sir Zelman Cowen,
Anne Deveson, Joan Kirner, Max Lake

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SYNOPSIS

Considering the horror of his childhood, it's amazing that Noel Tovey survived at all.

Born in the slums of Melbourne in 1933, Noel's early memories are 'all about drunks'. Sexually abused for the first time at the age of four, abandoned by his parents at six and bashed and bullied for being black, he ended up on the streets as a thief and 'rent boy'. In Pentridge Jail at age 17, he contemplated suicide—but the voices of his ancestors prevented him and helped turn his life around.

Inspired to reinvent himself, Noel pursued his dream to become a dancer and actor. He built a career in theatre, radio and television before marrying and sailing for England in 1960. There, he became principal dancer at Sadler's Wells Opera and an acclaimed choreographer.

He also opened an internationally renowned gallery with his new partner, Dave—whose death, after 17 years together, is one of the most deeply painful episodes in Noel's life story.

Noel's return to Australia in 1991 gave him the opportunity to connect more deeply with his Aboriginal heritage and contribute to the Indigenous community. As well as sitting on various boards and committees and teaching, he has continued to find success as a writer and theatre director.

In this intensely moving interview, Noel speaks—with extraordinary candour and grace—about his complex sense of identity (including his alter-ego, a blue-eyed white-skinned matinee idol called Rohan Scott-Rowan) and the forces and events that shaped him.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Drama, Media Studies, History and Studies of Society and Environment.

Australian Biography: Noel Tovey has been classified M with the consumer advice: adult themes, infrequent coarse language.

AFTER WATCHING

What do you recall from viewing the program?

1. When Noel Tovey was very young, what personal problems did his parents have?
2. What was the profession of Noel's father?
3. Who—and what—was Uncle Josh?
4. Why was Noel sent to the Far West Children's Home, and how was he treated there, as an Aboriginal?
5. Why was Noel sent back to Melbourne, and why did he become a 'street kid'?
6. What was Noel's first job, and what was its eventual connection to ballet?
7. Why was Noel sent to Pentridge prison, what happened to him there, and what saved him from suiciding?
8. Why did Noel change his name?
9. Why did he invent his alter-ego, Rohan Scott-Rowan?
10. Why did Noel decide to further his career in England?

11. Noel speaks of 'one of the few, very few, regrets' in his life. What is that regret, and why does he still feel it?
12. What was Noel's 'big break' in the West End?
13. Describe Noel's interests as a collector of 'art deco'.
14. Why did Noel close the musical Oh! Calcutta! when it toured Australia?
15. What was the conversation with a doctor that Noel had about his lover, Dave, and what happened as a result?
16. Explain why Noel wanted to return to Australia.
17. What are Noel's views about the education of Aboriginal people?
18. When Noel grew older, what did he realise about his mother?
19. What did Noel learn from his ancestors while in jail?
20. What is Noel's attitude now to the 'stigma' placed on him by others?

GROWING UP

As we see in the program, Noel's childhood and adolescence was an extremely difficult time for him, in poverty-stricken, violent and abusive circumstances.

- What was it like growing up in the inner-slum suburbs of Melbourne (or any large Australian city) during the Depression era of the 1930s and into the years of the Second World War? Research this question in preparation for an informative magazine-style article. Because this is a large topic, you may need to work in pairs or groups. Look at daily family and community life: living conditions; housing—rental or owned accommodation; whether there was hot and cold running water; food and nutrition; health issues; whether children attended school, and for how long; alcohol and drug problems; labour and unemployment; entertainment facilities and outlets. Were Aboriginal people more highly represented than other racial groups living in such poor circumstances, and if so, why? What kinds of government or social welfare assistance were available to individuals and families? Was crime, and therefore the presence of local police, a common daily reality? Find out whether people from the poor suburbs of cities were more highly represented in jails than people from elsewhere. Were inner-city Aboriginal people more highly represented in jail than others?
- In groups, drawing on the information you have researched, prepare and record an 'on-the-spot' radio documentary program, featuring reporters who, armed with sound equipment, venture into inner-suburban streets to record their impressions, conduct interviews, and to offer opinions and judgements about what they witness. You may include sound effects, voices in the background and music where necessary. The program may be uploaded as a sound file for playback on your school's intranet site.
- Write a short fiction story about the experiences of a child growing up in the type of environment experienced by Noel Tovey. Decide your approach—whether the story will be seen from the point of view of the central character or not, and whether it will be played out as a serious social commentary-drama.
- Select one or more scenes from the story you have written, and describe how you might represent them in a movie or TV drama, referring to camera shots, lighting, script dialogue, sound effects and music, location settings, décor and costuming etc.

- It has been claimed that in Victoria, an 'indigenous male's life expectancy (56.1 years) is 20.9 years lower than that for non-indigenous Victorian males, while an indigenous female's life expectancy (63.5 years) is 18.5 years less than that for non-indigenous Victorian females'. (Letter to the editor, **The Age**, 20 September 2005.) Discuss in class first, then write a report, using statistical evidence, graphs and charts where necessary, about present-day living conditions for young Aboriginal people living in both remote and city communities in Australia, comparing those conditions to the rest of the Australian community, and offering reasons for this situation, and possible solutions.
- As a class, read the Australian play, **Stolen**, by Jane Harrison (or if possible, view a performance of the play), and write a review of it for a youth-oriented website, particularly looking at the play's presentation of the issues of racial abuse, intolerance and prejudice.
- Write a summary of the laws throughout Australia related to the sexual abuse of minors, and the facilities provided by governmental and welfare organisations available to victims of abuse.
- During the program we see film of the Far West Children's Home, where Noel and his sister were sent. Research the history of the Far West Children's Health Scheme, and the Home, and the biography of the Scheme's founder, the Reverend Stanley Drummond, and present as an informative essay.
- According to a newspaper report, 'Aboriginal children are 12 times more likely to be placed in care than other Victorian children'. While in care, it was vital they should be kept in touch with their culture and heritage. (**The Age**, 1 September 2005.) As a class, prepare a report on the types of programs that are available in your state or territory for the protection, care, and cultural education of Aboriginal children. (The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, or VACCA, is one such example—see references.)

'BOHEMIAN' MELBOURNE

When he was about 15 years old, Noel began to take an interest in Melbourne's theatre and dance scene, and to mix with the 'bohemian' set, some of whose private activities were not only frowned upon by upstanding citizens, but on the statute books were unlawful, leading to police raids, arrests and imprisonment.

- Working in small groups, prepare an illustrated article about Melbourne's and/or Sydney's bohemian theatre and art scene of the post-war period (late 1940s-early 1950s) for a general entertainment magazine or website.
- From the above activity, write a short film script outline set within this milieu. You may wish to discuss in class possible topics, themes and approaches to how the story should be presented. You may also wish to plan a storyboard of at least one sequence.
- We are told in the program that Noel was 'a dancer at the Tivoli'. As a class, prepare a large wall poster display about Melbourne's famous Tivoli Theatre, its performers, shows and audiences.
- Noel studied with the highly respected American theatre actor, Hayes Gordon, who founded the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney. Prepare a magazine or website biography about Gordon and the importance and influence of the Ensemble Theatre (see references). Noel also took ballet lessons with Madame Borovansky. Prepare a similar biography about Eduard and Madame Borovansky, who were instrumental in the early development of what eventually became the Australian Ballet.

- During this time Noel performed in the highly popular stage musical comedy, **Salad Days**. Find out what this show was about, and when and where it was performed in Australia. If possible, listen to a recording of the songs, and perform them to the class. You may even wish to enact one or more scenes from the musical.

- Research and write a report on Australia's state laws related to homosexuality around the mid-20th century. Have these laws altered since then?
- Research and discuss in class what is meant by the term 'prison reform' and the activities of various prison reform groups throughout Australia. Discuss the relevance of prisoners' rights to the specific experiences of Noel Tovey as described in the program.
- How would you go about presenting a fictionalised film scene of Noel's realisation, in jail, that his ancestors were speaking to him, saving him from suicide? Consider dialogue, voice-over, sound effects, music, camera shots and lighting.

CAREER IN ENGLAND AS NOEL TOVEY

In England, Noel was able to leave his 'infamous' past behind, where he would not be judged on his 'black inheritance'. He directed, choreographed and appeared in some very famous productions.

- What are the various functions, tasks and roles required for the production of a staged musical comedy? Draw up a large poster chart defining and describing these elements of theatre.
- London's theatre precinct is known as the West End. Working in small groups, prepare a magazine display featuring a brief history of West End theatres, famous productions and star performers, choreographers, producers and directors. You may wish to organise this into chronological time-blocks of history, with each group concentrating on a particular era. Include references to Australians who have contributed to West End theatre.
- In small groups, discuss the range of possibilities and approaches you might take writing a short play script about a young, unknown Australian entertainer-performer, arriving in London hoping to pursue a career on the stage. Rehearse and perform the play for the class.
- During the program, Noel says that he gained a reputation in England as being 'difficult to work with', because he 'expected everyone to give absolutely 100 per cent all the time, the best'. Write two personal diary extracts about a situation where a theatre director is being 'difficult'. The first extract should be from the viewpoint of the director; the second extract should be from the viewpoint of a cast member. The extracts should be markedly different from each other in content, style, opinion and feeling, even though they are about the same situation. To dramatise them, you may wish to read them out to the class—or retain the services of two other students in the class to perform your words as a readers theatre piece.
- Highly influential London theatre critic Kenneth Tynan was responsible for the creation of the stage musical revue **Oh! Calcutta!** Research and write a popular magazine biography of Tynan. Clifford Williams directed the first performances of the production. Write a magazine biography of Williams.
- **Oh! Calcutta!** was considered bawdy and risqué. Its title was a pun on the French phrase, 'O quel cul t'as', which, translated into English, means, 'What a bottom you have'. As a class, research and

present either an informative arts radio production or some website pages (or an integrated package of both) about **Oh! Calcutta!**, including references to the various well-known artists, such as John Lennon, who contributed material to it. Also include the newspaper, police and public reaction to the revue.

- Write a comedy short story fictionalising the opening night of **Oh! Calcutta!** (Your story doesn't have to be entirely historically accurate.)
- Construct an informative wall poster about any one of the other plays and musicals in which Noel was involved. Examples are: **The Boyfriend, Charley's Aunt, Fiddler on the Roof, Godspell, Jesus Christ Superstar, Guys and Dolls, Lady Be Good.**
- The class should split into groups, with each group researching and preparing a talk to the class about one of the following: the Old Vic Theatre, Sadler's Wells Theatre, Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, London Theatre for Children (co-founded by Noel Tovey in 1981), Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. You may illustrate the talk where applicable with photos, newspaper or magazine clippings, and excerpts from video or DVD programs, or present it in integrated PowerPoint fashion.

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

Several experiences in Noel's personal life led him to an increased political consciousness. During the time Noel was in England his lover and business partner, Dave, contracted HIV/AIDS, and Noel observed some of the attitudes that came through ignorance about the illness. Noel also became aware of the excesses of the South African apartheid regime, and America's (and Australia's) involvement in the Vietnam War.

- Research and prepare a report on the beginnings of the HIV/AIDS outbreak in the western world during the 1980s, and the public reaction to both the illness and to those who contracted it. What were some of the social, cultural and religious stigmas applied to those who contracted HIV/AIDS? What medical treatments were there? How has the general situation and the reaction to the sickness changed over the years?
- Using Noel's recollections in the program about the death of Dave as reference material, write an outline for a short film or TV drama about characters caught up in the HIV/AIDS issue.
- Research and write a short history of the rise of both the anti-apartheid movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Discuss in class the relevance and importance to you of any similar political protest movements today.
- From what we are informed in the program, dramatise Noel's realisation that, as an Aboriginal, he had to return to Australia.

RETURN TO AUSTRALIA

When Noel returned to Australia in 1991 he became involved in teaching the performing arts to young Aboriginal students, and in working with various federal and state government committees to develop the Indigenous arts.

- In groups or as an entire class, prepare an information guide for students at your school about the aims, courses and facilities of Aboriginal education institutions in Australia, such as Eora College, the Aboriginal College of Visual and Performing Arts, where Noel taught after arriving back from England. How are they funded? Who may apply for entry? The guide may be presented for your school's intranet.

- Research the activities of two Aboriginal arts groups—the Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute and the Bangarra Dance Theatre—and as a class present a short, informative radio arts promotion program about them.
- Debate in class the relevance to modern Australia of Indigenous culture and the arts.
- Prepare a mock argumentative discussion between two people with opposing opinions, arising from Noel Tovey's view that Aboriginal students will be further 'marginalised' in Australian society if exempted from studying the works of William Shakespeare. You may want to dramatise the discussion by playing it out to the class.
- Towards the end of the program Noel discusses the 'stigma' and the 'pride' of being Aboriginal and gay. Discuss in class or write on the theme of racial or gay prejudice (or both) in Australia.
- Write your own commentary about the adversities and struggles of Noel Tovey's life, what he has had to achieve to overcome them, and what you have learnt or appreciated from his life story.
- Read and write a review of Noel's autobiography, **Little Black Bastard**, aiming your review at a popular magazine or TV program for teenage audiences. You may wish to draw comparisons to American-Irish writer Frank McCourt's autobiography, **Angela's Ashes**, in its depiction of extreme inner-city poverty and parental alcoholism.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Please note this listing is not exhaustive.

Books

- Maryrose Casey, **Creating Frames: Theatre Production by Indigenous Australians, 1967-1997**, doctoral thesis, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, 2002
- Lynn B. Daugherty, **Why Me? Help for Victims of Child Sexual Abuse (Even If They Are Adults Now)**, Boobook Publications, Balgowlah, NSW, 1986
- Lawrence Durrant, **Hayes Gordon: The Man and His Dream**, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1997
- Jane Harrison, **Stolen**, Currency Press, Redfern, 2002
- Wendy Lowenstein, **Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia**, Hyland House, 1978 (See also Richard Lowenstein in the Film listing below)
- Janet McCalman, **Struggletown: Public and Private Life in Richmond 1900-1965**, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1984 (Useful insight into Melbourne inner-suburban poverty)
- Frank McCourt, **Angela's Ashes**, HarperCollins, London, 1996
- Mirka Mora, **Wicked But Virtuous: My Life**, Penguin Books Australia, 2000 (Autobiography partly set in 'bohemian' art circles of Melbourne from 1951 onwards)
- Edward H. Pask, **Ballet in Australia: The Second Act 1940-1980**, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982 (Contains references to Borovansky)
- Noel Tovey, **Little Black Bastard: A Story of Survival**, Hodder Headline Australia, Sydney, 2004
- Kathleen Tynan, **The Life of Kenneth Tynan**, Methuen, London, 1988

Newspaper items quoted in this guide

'Aboriginal studies planned for children in care', **The Age**, 1 September 2005

'The Third World is much closer to home than you think', letter to the editor, **The Age**, 20 September 2005

Film

Richard Lowenstein (director), **Evictions**, 1979 (a half-hour dramatised documentary about inner-city poverty in Melbourne during the Great Depression, based on extracts from Wendy Lowenstein's **Weevils in the Flour**—see book listing above)

Frank Heimans (director), **Australian Biography: Hayes Gordon**, 1993, Film Australia

Websites

General

Oh! Calcutta!

www.answers.com/topic/oh-calcutta

Kenneth Tynan, theatre critic

www.guardian.co.uk/arts/critic/feature/0.1169.567652.00.html

Clifford Williams, theatre director

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clifford_Williams_\(actor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clifford_Williams_(actor))

Trove (search for images of Far West Children's Home)

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/general/australian-pictures-in-trove>

Australian Biography interview with aviator Nancy Bird-Walton,

with references to her association with Stanley Drummond

www.australianbiography.gov.au/birdwalton/interview2.html

Great Depression

<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/great-depression>

Indigenous Australia

Bangarra Dance Theatre www.bangarra.com.au

www.trinity.wa.edu.au/plduffyrc/aborigines

(Wide range of references and resources)

Eora College <http://sydneytafe.edu.au/future-students/eora-college/eora-college>

Tandanya, the National Aboriginal Cultural Institute

www.tandanya.com.au

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency www.vacca.org

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc www.vaeai.org.au

https://www.afao.org.au/library/hiv-australia/volume-13/vol.-13-number-3/exploring-aboriginal-gay-mens-hiv-testing-needs#.V_7PrNhf1aQ

(Research report 'Gay and homosexually active Aboriginal men in Sydney', with references to racism, homophobia, HIV/AIDS etc)



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