

JIMMY CHI — TRIBUTE

Statement by Minister for Culture and the Arts

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Minister for Culture and the Arts) [2.26 pm]: I rise in the house to acknowledge and pay tribute to a remarkable Western Australian who died yesterday in Broome. In doing so, I would like to inform the house that special family permission has been granted for me to use his name.

Jimmy Chi was a composer, musician, and playwright who won acclaim for his musicals *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*. His work was groundbreaking in many ways. *Bran Nue Dae* was regarded as the first Aboriginal musical. It won praise from critics, picked up numerous awards and broke box office records.

By all accounts, Jimmy Chi was a much loved person with a rich, complex background. He was born in Broome, and had a multicultural upbringing. His father was Chinese–Japanese and his mother had a Scottish–Bardi Aboriginal background. He was a gifted musician and composer and played for many years with the Kuckles band in Broome. He used that experience and a Catholic education to come up with *Bran Nue Dae*, a partly autobiographical musical about a Bardi boy expelled from school who returns home to explore his multicultural family background in Broome. The musical was produced in conjunction with the WA Theatre Company and hailed as extraordinary Indigenous theatre, leading to the creation of the Black Swan Theatre company with its mandate to tell WA stories through theatre. Not only did it win over audiences, the script won the WA Premier’s Book Awards Special Award and it was also turned into one of Australia’s most successful films. Jimmy Chi also wrote *Corrugation Road*, an award-winning musical set in a mental hospital, which drew on his own personal experience in dealing with mental illness.

At the age of 21, Jimmy was involved in a car accident that left him unconscious for three weeks. After that accident, he suffered long-term health problems. Unable to continue his studies, he found solace with his family in Broome and spent many hours listening to their stories, laughing and sharing the simple joy of just being. But he overcame those setbacks to become a gifted storyteller and musician, using his humour and insight to tell stories about WA.

Jimmy Chi received numerous awards for his contributions to culture and the arts. In 1991 he was awarded the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Drama Award for *Bran Nue Dae*. In 1997 he won the Australia Council’s Red Ochre Award for the lifetime achievement of an Indigenous artist. In 2004 Jimmy Chi was acknowledged as a Western Australian living treasure for his talents as a playwright, songwriter and musician, and a creator of landmark Indigenous theatre. That award also acknowledged another side to Jimmy Chi. It paid tribute to his work as an ambassador for the cultural diversity and energy of the Broome region. Jimmy Chi was a talented, generous person, a great observer of people whose work enriched us all.

A few final thoughts. The Australia Council’s John Moriarty, who was then with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board, perhaps summed him up best. When talking about Jimmy Chi, he said, “We are witness to an extraordinary talent, a man who encourages us to sing, dance and celebrate life even in our darkest moments.” We will all miss Jimmy Chi. We should all be proud of him. He was a great Western Australian.