Time and the audience’s perception

The structure of Stolen is relatively loose, dispensing with the conventional theatrical divisions of numbered acts and scenes. Such divisions would order the flow of time and generate coherence to the events being dramatised. However, Stolen is about events that have traumatic effects, events that cause the characters’ lives to lack structure and coherence.

Thus, Stolen’s short scenes and quick transitions between scenes, with few obvious causal links between them, generate a sense of incoherence. This makes the audience active participants in the experience of dislocation, and dramatises and communicates Aboriginal experience to a largely non-Aboriginal group. The audience’s senses are also directly involved through the playing of music and the use of Phenol in the two ‘cleaning routines’ (p.3, p.17). This pungent smell bridges the gap between actors and audience, lessening the audience’s (comfortable) sense of distance from the events played out on stage.

The many temporal shifts within the play are consistent with an Aboriginal view of time. The distinction between past and present is fluid rather than absolute, and the past is never entirely left behind.

White characters: out of sight

A number of offstage voices feature in Stolen, many of them representing white individuals. The white characters who exert such power over the children’s lives remain shadowy, often in a literal sense. In the scene ‘Line-up 1’ (p.6), the white couple is absent; the idea of whiteness is present in the form of a white spotlight that picks out Ruby, and ‘in the bright light she looks white’ (p.6). In the following scene, Anne’s parents are represented by ‘shadows falling on to a Venetian blind or a white sheet’ (p.6). A white spotlight on Anne effects an unsettling reversal: Anne is whitened, and the (white) parents appear dark.
The fact that white characters are unseen allows Aboriginal people to be foregrounded, and also reflects the remote, faceless aspects of white power in relation to Aboriginal lives. Under these conditions, any meaningful dialogue between black and white people is impossible; there are no mechanisms available to the Aboriginal characters for negotiating better circumstances.

Silence and language

Another interesting feature of Stolen is its economical use of language, and its emphasis on gesture and facial expression. Silence is often as important as speech in communicating meaning or extreme emotions.

The use of Aboriginal language is less a feature of Stolen than in other Aboriginal theatre. This reflects the fact that, in the Cranby Children's Home, the children are forbidden to use Aboriginal words. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families is thus placed in the context not of the government's ostensible concern for their material well-being, but of a broader government project that attempted to silence and then eventually destroy Aboriginal culture.

Humour

The children’s use of white speech patterns often turns into mimicry and parody, as in their chants and games – the patty cake game, for instance, or the tune 'We're happy little Vegemites'. Humour is a very important element in a play that represents so many distressing events; the play’s message is more effectively communicated when the theatrical experience is not all on the same emotional level. The characters’ abilities to laugh at their own predicaments are a feature of their resilience, of their collective capacity to survive oppressive governmental and bureaucratic regimes.