

Jan Wositzky ----- Storyman

According to Jan Wositzky there are many ways to skin a cat, and many different ways to tell stories. Jan Wositzky first became involved with the Victorian Storytelling Guild in 1996 when an old friend, Morgan Blackrose invited him to tell stories at the Guilds regular forum for storytelling, the monthly café at the _____ Hotel in Richmond. Following this he was invited to be a guest presenter at the 1997 Lorne Storytelling Conference. Now, as they say, he's part of the furniture and a highly respected member of the storytelling guild of Victoria.

True to the tradition of guilds of old there's a lot we can learn from this storyman, yarnspinner, dance caller, as well as musician who plays the 5-string banjo, mouth organ, spoons, bodharan (the mighty Irish drum) and most ancient instrument of them all-bones.

It's hard to know where to start with Wositzky's story because he enjoys exploring all the twists and turns in his life's path. But to give you a sense of the man we must go back to his arrival in Australia.

He immigrated to Australia with his Czech-Scots family in 1956 as a very young boy and herein lies the earliest influences on his work. One of the strengths of his storytelling is ability to have his audience empathize with his characters. Wositzky tells a poignant and humorous account of these early days. He's a young lad who cops a fair bit of flake for having such an ethnic name. Although we laugh, you feel for the small boy. Was it this early displacement that has seen him travel far and wide in the search of his own story?

Wositzky's path after school was Latrobe University where he studied to become a teacher. 'But before you could say "Waltzing Matilda" he was a founder of the Bushwackers Band - his first job.' These formative days as a performer have added a wealth of experience and understanding to his performance and left us with a legacy of definitive Australia Folk culture. Between 1974 and 1981 the band recorded a wealth of material; 'The Shearers Dream, The Band played Waltzing Matilda and the Bushwackers dance Album' to name just a few.

Then in 1981 Wositzky heard a tape of old Bill Harney telling his stories about his experiences in WW1 and he was intrigued. 'Bill Harney was arguably one of the best raconteurs in Australia, says Wositzky He wanted to find out more about the old man so he headed north.

If you've had the chance to see Wositzky perform his Harney piece you'll know of another great strength in his storytelling, his ability to get inside the character. Once he donned his old slouch hat and sat upright with his Harney sense of wisdom and authority he became the old man. It is a heart-rending story and although the words have faded in my memory I still remember my feelings of pathos. To think of the bright eyed young lad heading off on his big adventure only to return a shadow of a man. It is a beautiful piece of storytelling and credit must also go to Wositzky's wife Debbie Sonenberg for her direction. The timing, the choice of words, the body language all makes this a remarkably moving shared adventure. I long to feel and be the character as seamlessly as Wositzky. Is this a clue for us storytellers? Would outside direction and help with shaping characters benefit our presentations?

The Harney story became a defining moment for Wositzky as a member of the Bushwackers he'd always thrown in the odd yarn or two but this was different. It was such a difficult and moving story to tell that, he found it incredibly hard getting inside the character.

'I needed to get all the tears out before I could perform it, I had to get the performance under control.'

In 1984 he first performed a fifteen-minute version as a part of the Bushwacker's and Redgum's "farewell concerts". The success of the story opened his eyes to the power and possibilities of storytelling. A cabaret of storytelling and music from black and white Australia followed.

During this time Wositzky also involved himself with other diverse and interesting projects. He wrote the biography of Phar Lap's strapper, Tommy Woodcock (1986), directed the inaugural Brunswick children's Festival (1992), was an artist in residence in the Northern Territory (1989) and Brunswick (1991).

Then another sidewinder of a path, after journeying to the most isolated parts of this land he became profoundly moved by Aboriginal people and their culture. He found their stories big and powerful but wondered where he fitted into the landscape. Wositzky says he was often asked by the aborigines, 'Who are your people?' He found it a difficult question to answer.

At the same time Wositzky had been thrown another lure by the legendary Ted Egan. A tale of an Intellectual Hobo that lived at Borrooloola, in the gulf country of the Northern Territory. So off he headed again, this time accompanied by his wife and two young daughters. They were wild days but important days for Wositzky and his family. They became involved with the local Yanyuwa community and learned much as they helped produce documentaries and books about local culture and history. They loved they countryside and spent one of their ten years away living in a tent on the edges of the Gulf Of Carpentaria.

From his Yanyuwa hosts he learnt to have great respect for the ancient Dreamtime stories and the land. He knew of the effects of colonialism, stories taken without authority, the land, its people and their children stolen. Wositzky was sensitive to this appropriation of another culture and how political it was to use the stories. But with time came understanding and awareness. His friends were happy to share their stories with him but he must use the stories to honour them. He must acknowledge where the stories are from and tell of the people and their relationship to and love of the land. From his early days as a folksinger he knew that the source of the story was often definitive.

He came to feel a great rapport with the local indigenous artists and Wositzky remembers feeling like he was sitting on the edge of the great Australian culture. Listening to the stories of the Aboriginal people of the Gulf country made him question his own mythology and psychology. As Joseph Campbell says in his classic, *The Power of Myth*- myth is like shards of pottery in an archeological dig, frameworks for our life. He felt the pull of both worlds. He wanted to understand the mythology of this sunburnt country but he also wanted to find stories of depth from his Czech, Scottish roots.

Then with the synchronism that life often throws to us he saw the movie *The Piano* and read the story the *Handless Maiden*. They hit me physically, I didn't understand what it was but I sensed the depth of emotion it stirred in me. I now realised what renowned storyteller ,

author, and friend, Brian Hungerford had meant when he told me look to "the myths that rule our life's.

So, we gather up all the threads Of Wositzky's exploration and we come to his latest one-man show Yapucha, the tale of a whitefella discovering the meaning of life when he travels up north. In typical style the long narrative segues from to story to song to music, 'this is the form I like to work with.' He's interested in the structures and motives from the old legends being pulled into modern yarns, but I'm not a dead set storyteller just a bit of a yarnspinner and my show reflects my this.

I don't know if I agree, Wositzky is a great storyteller but as he says, 'there are many ways to skin a cat.'