# Jack Charles V The Crown

## Programme notes

Uncle Jack Charles is an Australian legend: a veteran actor, musician, Aboriginal elder and activist, who performs this powerful one-man show on the colourful life he has led on stage and screen and most poignantly behind bars.

From Stolen Generation to Koori theatre in the 70s, from Hollywood film sets to Victoria's state prisons, *Jack Charles V The Crown* runs the gamut of a life lived to its utmost. A gifted performer, Jack Charles has struggled with homelessness, drug addiction and jail time for much of his career. But this is no simple parable of crime and punishment. Charles' charm, humour, talent and unswerving optimism transforms his life of hard knocks into an extraordinary tale.

Returning triumphantly to the stage, Charles is not afraid to confront the complexity of his story. In doing so he shines a light on Australia's history of injustices against Aboriginal people. His vital reflections on race and the punitive state are uplifted by a sense of hope found within the redemptive qualities of storytelling.

Under the wing of ILBIJERRI, the oldest indigenous theatre company in Australia, Charles' journey moves lyrically between raw video footage, charismatic monologues, mock courtroom trials and even a pottery demonstration, all interspersed with rousing musical numbers backed by a three-piece band. Delighting audiences internationally, including at an acclaimed premiere season at London's Barbican Theatre, Charles' generous spirit and warm presence is set to win the hearts of Auckland audiences.

Recommended for ages 15+. Contains strong language, adult themes and images of drug use.

## Descriptive notes:

These notes have been provided by Audio Described Aotearoa Ltd based on a recording of a previous performance. They are intended to be read by blind and low vision patrons prior to the show to enhance understanding of the visual elements of the performance. They introduce the performer, costume, set, props and lighting.

## Description

The piece is a one-man show featuring Jack Charles – a small Aboriginal man in his 70s. He has white frizzy hair that’s parted in the centre and cut to shoulder length, a neatly trimmed white beard and moustache with hints of black beneath. He has brown skin, a wide smile and dark eyes with a twinkle in them. He wears beige trousers, a pale yellow shirt with a wide collar and sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and brown lace up shoes. When he’s working with clay he wears a brown half apron tied at the waist.

Jack’s monologue is supported by music and sound effects from three musicians who sit on the left hand side of the stage with a range of instruments including guitars, a drum kit and a keyboard. There’s another guitar leaning on the back wall closer to the centre and a fourth microphone that Jack uses when he sings.

Video and photographs are projected onto the wall. They relate directly to the spoken word that accompanies them. For example, at the beginning of the piece, footage shows Jack preparing to inject drugs into his arm and discussing it with an unseen woman. As the soundtrack changes to read out details of Jack’s charge sheets, these appear on the screen interspersed with mugshots of Jack. Some of the video is documentary, some from his acting roles. Jack describes many of the photographs which are mostly childhood photos, mugshots, or pictures from his time in film and television: Jack as a smartly dressed schoolboy; as a young man with short black hair and dark features; an older Jack with unkempt greying hair and beard holding his prisoner number: 3944.

The only text that isn’t read out is the following extract from the Melbourne City Mission Record (1 Dec 1945) “... we had to part with little Jack Charles – our little aborigine boy. Jackie is a delightful child, loved by all, but unfortunately, due to his age, he had to be moved on...”

The set creates four distinct spaces. The left is dominated by the musicians and Jack’s microphone.

In the centre of the stage at the back there’s a slightly raised platform a couple of metres wide and deep that angles in at the front to a low step to allow Jack to step on and off and sit on the edge. On the platform there’s a chair behind a potter’s wheel, shelves that hold clay tools and finished works, and at the front right there’s a bucket of water for Jack to wash the clay off his hands. On the left of the platform is a small wooden table with three flat sides and one rounded side that is uppermost when Jack turns the table onto its side near the end of the show, revealing his criminal record number etched into the warm brown tabletop.

To the right of the platform on the stage itself is a brown leather rocking chair with wooden arms. A brown velvet jacket with a cameo brooch on the left lapel hangs over the back. In front of the chair is a small mismatched brown leather footstool and next to it is a small table with a cup and newspapers on it.

Further right there’s a single bed made up with a pillow and a plain blanket like a prison bed.

The stage is covered in brown wooden floorboards

Bordering the stage are two wooden frames that meet in the middle to form a corner and angle out to the sides of the stage. The frames have diamond panels, some left open to form doorways, others covered to allow photos and video to be projected onto them. The open panel behind the armchair creates a shelf that holds a kettle, a teapot, a box of teabags and a teatowel.

The lighting matches Jack’s mood. At times he’s focused, particularly when he’s working with clay. The lighting is soft and warm and focused on him and especially on his hands. At other times, he’s animated –when he’s leaping about the stage, waving the Australian flag wildly for the Queen, the light is bright and wide. The soft lights return when he’s relaxed, sitting back in his rocking chair holding a cup of tea, and are bright again when he dons a blue thigh-length jacket with blue sequinned lapels and stands behind a microphone near the musicians to launch into jazz classics. When Jack reminisces about difficult periods in his life, the lights have a bluish hue and are dim with more shadows.

At the beginning of the piece, the musicians cross the stage to take their places on the left and Jack steps up to the platform to sit in front of a potter’s wheel, moulding clay where he stays for the opening 15 minutes, rolling balls of clay and then using the wheel, splashing water on the clay and forming it into shapes using both hands.

There is a musical interlude at around 45 minutes when Jack goes off to the right, grabs a red shirt off the bed and moves out of sight. He reappears wearing the red shirt and a brown waistcoat buttoned over it and sits on the bed to change into smart shiny black and red brogues, grabs the brown jacket from the back of the chair and pulls that on, leaving it unbuttoned. He brushes his hair then dashes in to pick up the ringing phone.

Ends.