

A talented life rediscovered

THEATRE

JACK CHARLES V THE CROWN

★★★

By Jack Charles and John Romeril, Ilbijerri Theatre Company, the Arts Centre, until October 17

Cameron Woodhead Reviewer

“WHEN you’re pushed out on stage,” says Jack Charles in the 2008 documentary *Bastardy*, “that’s when you’re born.”

In his case, that’s true. And despite labour pains, the indigenous actor’s return to the stage — following nearly four decades of heroin addiction, homelessness and crime — is an act of joy.

It’s fitting that Ilbijerri Theatre’s 20th anniversary includes Charles, who helped found the first indigenous theatre company, in 1972. His acting career — thwarted by a cycle of addiction and imprisonment — nevertheless featured appearances in *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* and *Blackfellas*, and many theatrical performances.

Jack Charles v the Crown opens with confronting scenes from the doco: Charles matter-of-factly shooting up smack on



camera. After the hit, he challenges the viewer to see addiction as a victimless crime.

This delusion is rapidly annihilated. An audio-visual tour of his rap sheet runs to dark comedy, until you remember the victims of his many burglaries.

His voice, when it comes, is a thing of haunting beauty. Earthy and melodious, seeming to savour every word, Charles possesses a rhetorical authority that commands attention.

He smiles with his whole body, his charisma appears inexhaustible. Back turned, he allows himself a few moments of regret in this show. He knows the real crime was committed against his talent; its victims all the people whose lives he could have touched, if only . . .

Charles’s story moves from the strength he found mastering pottery in jail to poignant recollections of life as a member of the stolen genera-

tions. He relates yarns from his white-washed existence, and sings a jaunty period song about how grand it was that the white man came.

Charles isn’t interested in pity or in absolution, though, and the second half veers into advocacy. He wants his criminal record disregarded, so he can go overseas without hassle and, more importantly, teach pottery to students.

With the aid of John Romeril, the show is gently moulded into theatrical shape. The legalistic address isn’t as dramatically successful as the autobiographical vignettes — and Charles needed regular prompting, though once he’s off and running, the spoken word is his to command.

One thing he never forgets is a song. Accompanied by a three-piece band, he peppers the show with numbers, ending with a moving blues version of Oodgeroo’s poem *Son of Mine*.

Jack Charles v the Crown is a tribute to an indigenous star, and an inspiring journey of resilience and reconnection.

This work is eligible for The Age Critic’s Award.