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Caught between cultures can be a drama

ASHLEIGH WILSON
ARTS EDITOR

About 2½ years ago, Ursula Yovich travelled to Darwin for her mother's funeral and encountered a different world. As the eldest child, many decisions about the funeral fell to her, even though she struggled to comprehend the indigenous traditions involved.

One family member reminded her of the importance of the ceremony, how "we must get it right".

"And I completely mucked it up," Yovich says. "I guess being able to write about it now is also about forgiving myself, forgiving family, forgiving history."

Yovich is best known as an actor and singer, but a new idea was taking hold. Perhaps she could write a play based on her story: growing up between cultures as the daughter of an Aboriginal woman and a Serbian man.

Her plans gathered pace in Sydney yesterday when Yovich, 38, was named the winner of the Balnaves Foundation Indigenous Playwright's Award at Belvoir St Theatre. She is the fifth recipient of the \$20,000 award, which is



JANE DEMPSTER

Award-winner Ursula Yovich, in Sydney yesterday

designed to encourage the telling of indigenous stories on stage.

The commission will be a deeply personal exercise for Yovich as she explores issues of cultural identity and family.

Yovich says it still causes her anxiety that her mother's funeral was held in Darwin, far from her home country in Arnhem Land. Discussions about the ceremony made her question where she fitted into the world.

"I didn't know the (indigenous) cultural protocols beyond the very

basic stuff," she said. "And because of the way I look, I'm not from my father's world either. And I don't know either of those languages so I really am caught in the middle."

Yovich has been a regular on the stage, from *The Sapphires* and *Capricornia* (for which she won a Helpmann award in 2007) to *A Christmas Carol* at Belvoir. Her screen credits include *Jindabyne*, Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* and the ABC TV series *Redfern Now*.

In 2009 she first performed *Magpie Blues*, a cabaret show that



Yovich performing in *The Sapphires*

drew on her life story. This project is her first solo effort as a writer.

"*Magpie Blues* was about identity and my foundations between these two very rich cultures," she says.

"This particular piece is about the aftermath: the death of my mother, and the complexities and traditions around an indigenous funeral, and how the Western world encroaches on being able to fulfil that ceremony."

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