



Citation for the Award of Degree of – Doctor of Letters honoris causa

Mr Noel Tovey OAM

Mr Noel Tovey AM was born in Carlton, Melbourne in 1934, the son of an Aboriginal/New Zealander mother, a father of African-Canadian and French-Creole heritage and a great-grandmother who was a Ngarrindjeri woman from South Australia

Noel Tovey has lived an extraordinary life. He was one of five children abandoned by his parents in the 1930s. A young Aboriginal boy living on the streets of inner city Melbourne, Mr Tovey experienced a traumatic childhood and adolescence.

Despite the early hardship, Mr Tovey was inspired to reinvent himself and went on to become a leading light in the arts as a dancer, actor, director, narrator, production designer, playwright and choreographer.

His formal education was over by the age of 12 and it was as a 15 year old, working in the Collins Book Depot in Melbourne that he first went to see the ballet *Les Sylphides* at the National Theatre. This inspired him to begin ballet classes at the National Theatre Ballet School, then joining the Ballet Guild where he danced in *En Cirque* and *The Sentimental Bloke*.

In 1960, Mr Tovey moved to England where he remained for 30 years. Here he became a principal dancer with The Sadler's Wells Company in London, making his singing debut in *On The Level*, a musical by Australian Ron Grainer. Mr Tovey's career as a choreographer was launched in 1966 with a production of Sandy Wilson's *The Boyfriend*. The show was a resounding success and toured Britain and Australia in 1968.

Mr Tovey went on to direct and choreograph many theatre productions in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. He also taught at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and co-founded the London Theatre for Children.

In 1971 following the success of his market stall in London's Antiquarius Antiques Market, Mr Tovey and his partner Mr David Sarel established an antiques gallery, L'Odeon, which specialised in early twentieth century decorative art pieces. There were only 3 galleries specialising in 20th Century Decorative Art at the time of L'Odeon opening and by 1980 it had become one of the "top galleries" in London. The gallery sold works to some of the best known galleries in the world, including the Victoria and Albert Museum UK, Rijks Museum Amsterdam and the Museum of Modern Art New York and earned Mr Tovey the reputation of being an expert in the Art Deco period. L'Odeon closed in 1990, following the death of his mother and partner, and a year later Mr Tovey moved back to Australia.

Mr Tovey's return to Australia in 1991, gave him the opportunity to further connect with his Aboriginal heritage and contribute to the Indigenous community. He set up a performing arts course at the Eora Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Sydney and continued to direct many theatre productions, with standouts being *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with an entirely Aboriginal cast for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Arts Festival of *The Dreaming* and as the Artistic Director of the Indigenous Welcome Ceremony for the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Mr Tovey's autobiography, *Little Black Bastard*, for which he received the 2000 Indigenous Fellowship to write, was published by Hachette in 2004. Mr Tovey followed with another story about his life and stellar career when, *And then I found me*, was published in 2017.

Mr Tovey is openly gay and has spoken out for the rights of LGBT elders. In June 2010, Mr Tovey was recognised for his contribution to the LGBT community by becoming the 2010 recipient of the Foundation For All of Us Lifetime Achievement Award.

In January 2015, he was made a member of the Order of Australia for significant service to the performing arts, to Indigenous performers and as an advocate for the LGBTI community and in the same year was inducted to the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll.

Boards and Committees Mr Tovey has served on include The Australia Council for the Arts, The NSW Premiers Literary Award, Arts in Multi-Cultural Australia, NSW Ministry for the Arts & The Arts Council of NSW, The National Playwrights Conference, The re-development of the Sydney Museum, The Sydney Writers Festival, 2000 Olympic Arts Festival, The Aboriginal Arts Reference Group and Aboriginal Alcohol Related Alzheimer's Disease.

In 2017, Mr Tovey was inducted into the Australian Dance Awards Hall of Fame as Australia's first male ballet dancer of Indigenous heritage.

Mr Tovey has worked to ensure that others have the opportunity to flourish through exposure to the arts. In 2001 he established the Noel Tovey Scholarship Fund and in 2006 the Noel Tovey Award for Achievement, both of which give young people access to a performing arts education.

Mr Tovey's distinguished service to the performing arts in Australia and internationally make him an extremely worthy recipient of the degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* from Flinders University.