

# Storyteller gets on board to share the knowledge of his culture and heritage

By MARTIN FLANAGAN

GLENN Shea was 21 years old and playing Snout in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he met his mother for the first time since his birth.

He says it was like looking into a mirror for the first time. "Suddenly that hole within you about who you are and where you're from begins to fill." He learnt that his mother's people are the Ngarrindjeri from around the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia. He still doesn't know his father.

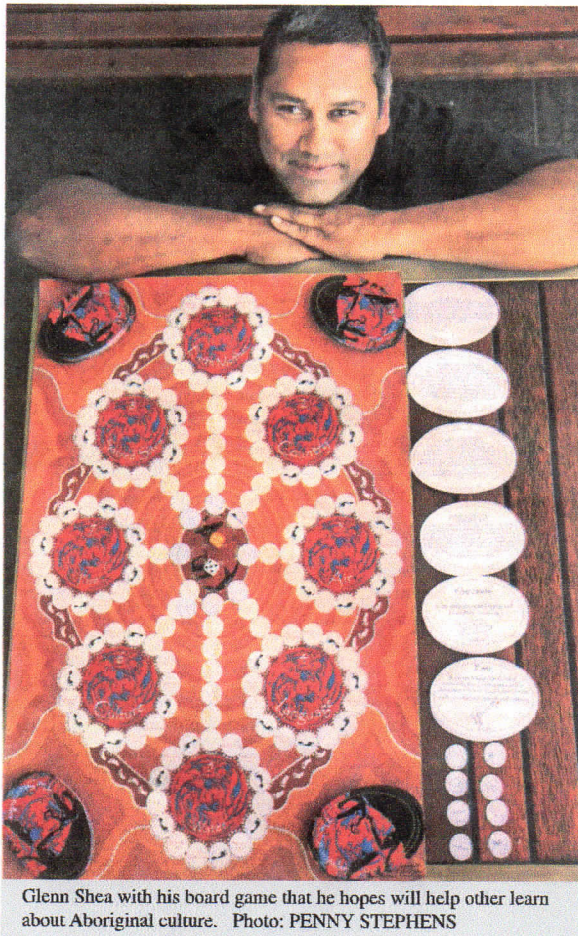
Shea is 43. His manner is jovial, but it has not always been. He describes his life as the story of a black ghost. As he puts it, at the time of his birth, he qualified as "fauna and flora". The 1967 referendum that granted Aboriginal Australians full citizenship was still two years away. At birth, he was handed over to what he calls "the church", although which church he cannot say. He was then adopted by a strong Baptist family who lived at Shelford, north-west of Geelong. The family adopted seven other Aboriginal children — all girls. Glenn Shea is not his birth name.

Shea, the first Aboriginal actor to graduate from NIDA, wrote his first play when he was 10. It was about Muhammad Ali throwing his Olympic medal in the river after he returned to America and was refused service in a restaurant because he was black. Shea was an unusually talented young man. While still in his teens, he was picked up by the Geelong Football Club and put in a special house for young players they were developing.

He remains a big supporter of the Cats but says of that period of his life: "It was a fractured time. I don't think I understood them and I don't think they understood me. I was naive. I just wanted to play footy. I think in the end they got sick of me." When the coach told him he was being cut from the list, he literally had no idea of where to go or what to do. He ended up at the door of a local Wathaurong elder, Uncle Trevor Edwards.

Shea has a relationship with the Wathaurong, the traditional owners of the Geelong area, and speaks their language. He lives in Geelong where he combines acting with working with young Koori offenders. He played the role of Edgar in the ABC's *East of Everything* and, in 2009, he will appear in an MTC production of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

When I ask him why he likes acting, he gives two answers. He likes what he calls the escapism.



Glenn Shea with his board game that he hopes will help other learn about Aboriginal culture. Photo: PENNY STEPHENS

"Being someone else is sometimes easier than being yourself." But he also wants to be a good storyteller. And he is a good storyteller. Telling me about some tough characters he knew in Redfern, he drops into character and I find myself looking into the eyes of a man who would hold a shotgun to another's face.

Over the past 20 years, while travelling Australia as a performing artist, Shea spent time wherever he could with Aboriginal elders in cities and "out bush". In 1981, after he sat in a circle of older men and refrained from speaking or interrupting, an elder told him he had "done well".

He describes his Aboriginal education as a case of "look and listen".

Shea says the young Koori offenders he works with have many sources of confusion in their lives, but what they are clear and strong about is their Aboriginality. He has invented a board game that aims to pass on what he has learnt about his heritage. It is equally open to anyone who wants to learn about the world's oldest living culture and the land we share. "I want to challenge people to access that knowledge," he says.