

The lyrics in Gerardo Dirié's work *Truths of Khan* are from Australian historical records. They are not a fictional creation.

The words are found in an Australian Customs certificate of 1916 exempting Mr Bhouta Khan from a dictation test, and Mr Bhouta Khan was an ancestor of Tony Birch, the First Nations Australian author who recounts this story in his book of poetry *Whisper Songs*.

On Tuesday 3 May, Tony Birch delivered *The First Word* to officially open the 2022 Brisbane Writers Festival, and as Tony finished speaking Brisbane Concert Choir began the dialogue introduction to *Truths of Khan* in a dramatic reaffirmation of this less than gracious time in Australia's history. This music was commissioned by the Brisbane Writers Festival to amplify *The First Word*, and is the creation of Brisbane composer Gerardo Dirié.

Gerardo's second movement titled *Water Ways* exudes both pain and beauty in reflecting the stories, memories and emotions mainly of the third and final section of *Whisper Songs*, a section titled *Water*. It was spiritually soothing that this was sung from the rooftop balcony of Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art overlooking the city reach of the Brisbane River.

Mr Bhouta Khan, a hawker (travelling sales person) was born in 'British India' but had lived in the 'British colony of Australia' for 20 years when, in the winter of 1916 he wished to travel with his immediate family from his home in Fitzroy Victoria, to India for six months.

Even though this was barely a century ago, anyone living in Australia who did not have white-skin or proof of British heritage, was not automatically considered a 'true man' by government officials, and required to go to extreme lengths to establish both 'who' they were, and whether they could be trusted.

The factual evidence is in what Gerardo has used for the lyrics in the first movement *Truths of Khan* taken directly from the words written by the Collector of Customs in 1916, in deciding that 'Mr Bhouta Khan, who claims to be a man' be granted a dictation exemption under the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. Gerardo's composition retells this part of the story as it was written in 1916: 'To be certain that the Bhouta Khan who leaves this land is the same Bhouta (Khan) who returns I submit to the Commonwealth the following description of him: Nationality: Indian ...' and so on.

This is one of the eight documents Mr Bhouta Khan was required to produce or secure before departure. In another, police refused to accept Mr Bhouta Khan's spelling of his own name, insisting instead on using a phonetic spelling from another government record, and officially re-writing it as Boota Khan.

This was a premiere performance in which history resonated profoundly.

This soulful story - among many others - is told in Tony Birch's book of poetry *Whisper Songs* first published by University of Queensland Press in 2021.