When Rob Collins accepted the Silver Logie Award for best new talent earlier this year, he spoke in the language of his ancestors from the Tiwi Islands, north of Darwin. His words were broadcast onto the television screens of more than 1.7 million viewers, who watched on as Australian television’s highest honours were handed out. It was an important gesture for Collins to make in front of a whopping national audience, given the critical need to preserve Indigenous languages that are in danger of dying out.

“EVERYONE NEEDS AN ANCHOR IN THIS LIFE”

Rob Collins is back at home in Darwin after wrapping up filming on the latest season of *The Wrong Girl*. He opens up about his Tiwi roots, playing non-Indigenous roles and the importance of family.

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Language and the revival of Indigenous languages have been an important theme for Collins, who starts in Ten’s hit television drama The Wrong Girl, in both his personal life and career. His mother is a Wurrumiyanga woman from the south-eastern tip of Bathurst Island, which is one of two inhabited islands in the Tiwi Islands group (the other is Melville). He spent a lot of time on the Tiwis when he was growing up and even went to school there for a while. His uncles, aunties and cousins still live there, so he tries to visit a few times a year. Being able to speak Tiwi is not just about being able to communicate, Collins explains. It is an integral part of his identity.

“Everyone needs an anchor in this life. Something safe, familiar, that reminds you who you are, and that you’re connected to something bigger than yourself. Something that defines and uplifts you and marks your place in the world,” he says.

“That’s what it means to me to be Tiwi, and to be able to speak my language. We lose that, we lose everything.”

Indigenous languages that are still spoken today are at risk of being lost as elders pass away. The need to protect, preserve and strengthen traditional languages is something that Collins feels “personally and acutely”.

“I really fear our elders are dying at a faster rate than the preservation of language can keep up with,” he says.

“Being a dad, I want to pass the language on to my children, and the thought of them losing that connection actually turns my stomach.”

Collins plays Waruu West in ABC TV’s Cleverman, a critically acclaimed sci-fi drama where the Aboriginal characters speak Gumbaynggirr (NSW mid-north coast) and Bundjalung (northern NSW) languages. Cleverman broke ground in terms of diversity on Australia television by featuring an 80 per cent Indigenous cast. Set in a dystopian future, Cleverman follows the story
of an Indigenous superhero and a persecuted mythological race who must live in hiding from the government. It has been well received not only in Australia but also the US, and was nominated alongside Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade* for a prestigious Peabody Award for electronic media.

While Collins is proud of the platform that *Cleverman* gives to Indigenous languages and characters, he also feels strongly about the importance of seeing Indigenous actors in non-Indigenous roles.

“It’s important creatively for actors to play diverse roles, but I think it’s more important that what you see on screen should be just as diverse as what you see on the street,” he says.

“That, in turn, is important because the film and TV industry has huge sway in influencing our collective social conscience.”

In *The Wrong Girl*, Collins plays charming TV chef Jack Winters – a non-Indigenous character. Getting to star alongside Australian television sweetheart Jessica Marais was part of the allure of the job, but “what really sealed the deal” was the opportunity to play a non-stereotypical role.

“The opportunity to audition for a role that didn’t box me as Indigenous was important for me. More opportunities like that should be given to our mob,” Collins says.

“Saying I want the same casting opportunities as non-Indigenous actors doesn’t rule out the fact that as an Indigenous actor I’m part of a unique group of artists that had to overcome significant hurdles to get to where they got,” he continues.

“All actors struggle to a greater or lesser degree, but there’s no denying Indigenous actors have a particular set of experiences tied to their culture.”

It was only four years ago that Collins graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts at the relatively advanced age of 33. Prior to successfully auditioning for the prestigious acting school at the suggestion of a director he met while acting in a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in Darwin, Collins had thought of acting as “just for fun” and had “no thought of making a serious career out of it”. Soon after completing his studies, Collins landed the role of Mufasa in the stage adaption of Disney’s *The Lion King*. And his career has “snowballed” since then.

“There’s definitely more folk recognising me since *The Wrong Girl*, I guess because network telly has that reach. But I actually have never had that feeling that I’ve ‘arrived’,” he says.

“I think it’s probably because success in this industry can be a fleeting thing, and something I feel I have to constantly work at.”

Despite his achievements, memories of tougher times are not far beneath the surface. Collins recalls the sacrifices his wife, Laetitia Lemke, and their three children made so that he could pursue his dreams. He describes the time they came to see him on stage in *The Lion King* as simultaneously the most exciting, memorable and proud moment of his career, because it was proof their efforts were all worth it.

“It had been such a hard slog to get to that point. Uprooting my family, tearing my kids out of their community and friend groups, having my wife put her career on hold for me – it all culminated in that moment,” he says.

“We were together, and we felt for the first time that we were going to be okay.”