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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a growing interest and appetite for First Nations arts, stories and performances. Creating new performing arts work by, with and about First Nations peoples can meet multiple purposes and agendas, artistically, socially, culturally and personally. This development also occurs within economic, policy and institutional environments which require considerable knowledge and skill to navigate.

This research project sought to understand the experiences of First Nations artists, technicians and creatives in the realm of contemporary performing arts through case study work related to a regional theatre company – JUTE Theatre Company – and the development of new works focused on First Nations stories. The research included data gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with First Nations creatives associated with two original performance works, *Proppa Solid* (2016/2017) and *Bukal* (2018). The focus of this report is on the career trajectories, enablers and challenges for the Indigenous creatives involved, as well as the company. The research also documented and analysed the process undertaken for the development of the new work *Bukal* by Andrea James, featuring the story and life of Henrietta Fourmile Marrie.

Enablers that were identified in the First Nation creatives' backgrounds included early experiences of performing, and in some cases experiences of First Nations arts/culture/performance. Access and participation in arts experiences within the community, or through youth groups and special programs plays a key role for many performing artists. Various types of educational experiences were important, including formal educational institutions such as school, being able to take drama as a subject or elective and having supportive and encouraging teachers. Participants had engaged in a range of professional training, vocational education and university courses. Some of these were courses with a specific focus on Indigenous arts and targeted support for Indigenous students.

In the professional field the important roles of networks and mentors within the Indigenous arts community were deemed as extremely important and valuable to accessing work opportunities. The Indigenous arts 'grapevine' has been important for many artists to access professional opportunities and was the way many had heard or been engaged for work. The existence of First Nations arts companies and festivals was deemed a key enabler, enabling processes supportive of telling a diverse range of First Nations stories. It was acknowledged that companies that are not Indigenous per se can be supportive as well, especially when attention is paid to processes, protocols, cultural safety and respect.

The development of new performance work is human resource intensive, generally collaborative, with development and rehearsal processes that occur over extended periods of time. To be able to develop and share that work in a professional sphere, requires multiple skillsets and professional support in administrative, production and technical expertise. This signals the importance of working with a supportive company or organisational structure, Indigenous or non-Indigenous and their provision of a 'safety-net' to support the creative process.

The process for developing *Bukal* occurred over several years, involved multiple creative developments, engaging an Indigenous creative team in most roles (wherever possible) and an Indigenous Producer and Cultural Consultant. A range of processes and practices were embraced to support cultural integrity, agency and safety, sourcing funding from multiple agencies and partners. The concept of 'cultural agency' is of particular relevance to the arts sector, recognizing that First Nations artists and creatives want to lead and be the key 'agents' in these processes, which are all further grounded by community and cultural understanding.

Through analysing these experiences it is clear that companies who wish to engage in creating new First Nations art need to invest time and resources in building relationships, trust and partnerships. Attention must be paid to auditing processes, governance and programming to pro-actively consider the ways to create high quality work that is created with integrity. For agencies and funding bodies, allowances should be made with due regard to cultural safety and agency, and allocations for the people and time to do things well. Support identified as still being required by some First Nations artists and creatives included funded internships for First Nations creatives, especially in areas where there were limited numbers of professionals.

The development of new performance work needs to be considered within the context of the ecologies of practice that enable such to occur. A layered network of arts entities, small, medium and large is required to be able to offer a diversity of experiences and production opportunities. Across the ecology, there need to be First Nations companies of different scope and size, from majors to small and medium organisations as well as commitment from non-Indigenous companies and venues to commission and program First Nations work. Across the board there needs to be commitment to enabling 'cultural agency' and doing it well. The territory might be complex but it also rich and rewarding, as there is so much potential and so many stories yet to be told.

Note:

In this document, the terms 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' are used interchangeably to refer with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This report makes no attempt to represent all First Nations performing artists and voices or to speak on their behalf, but we hope that it may assist to open up a space for further dialogue and possibilities.

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INTRODUCTION

This research project aims to better understand the 'experiences' of First Nations artists, technicians and creatives in the realm of contemporary performing arts, particularly for the experiential art form of theatre making. The research is presented through examining the enablers and challenges impacting upon career trajectories for First Nations performing artists, and a case study of for the development of a new First Nations work. The context for this research has been work initiated by JUTE Theatre Company – a regional professional theatre company based in Cairns, Queensland – and the artists and new works developed as part of their *Dare to Dream* program. The process has involved data gathered through in-depth interviews and focus groups with First Nations artists and creatives associated with the development and touring of original performance works, *Proppa Solid* (by Steven Oliver and touring in 2016/2017) and *Bukal* (by Andrea James and touring in 2018). The focus of this report is on the career trajectories, training, aspirations and challenges for the Indigenous artists, stage manager and core creatives involved. The second section presents a case study of the process undertaken for the creative development of *Bukal* by Andrea James, featuring the story and life of Henrietta Fourmile Marrie. This case study explores the opportunities and challenges afforded through a staged, collaborative creative process and aims to explore some of the issues and considerations for companies and groups who wish to create contemporary new works featuring First Nations stories.

This research complements other work being undertaken for the Australia Council research project, *Creating Art*. In addition, it contributes further knowledge to the completed research, *Showcasing Creativity: Programming and presenting First Nations performing arts*. Please note that throughout this report the terms First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are all used interchangeably to refer with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

JUTE Theatre Company is a regional theatre company that was founded in 1992, and has a long history of supporting the development of new work, both text-based and devised, featuring stories from 'the regions'. They are not an 'Indigenous' arts company but have maintained a focus on developing and showcasing diverse voices through their programs, including works by Indigenous artists.

JUTE Theatre initiated the *Dare to Dream* program with the intention of featuring new theatre works by, about and for First Nations peoples. JUTE piloted the program through commissioning the work *Proppa Solid* by Steven Oliver. The creation of this work was informed through consultations with Traditional Owners and Elders. They expressed a desire to have young people learn about and value culture through seeing performances featuring *positive* stories about Indigenous experience and also featuring Indigenous professionals as role models.

This initial project was funded through a combination of sources but from 2016 JUTE developed a longer-term partnership with the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation to support the program's continuation for at least four years. Each year a theatre work was developed, then toured to schools in North Queensland. To enable greater impact within communities, tours included a one-week residency program conducted in 10 schools each year, with those schools having significant numbers of Indigenous students. During the week Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth participated in drama and storytelling workshops and at the end of the process they shared what they created with the community. This case study research capitalised on the opportunity to work

with the clusters of artists and creatives associated with JUTE and the *Dare to Dream* touring program. This context provided an excellent opportunity to examine the development of creative work and professional careers for First Nations artists in a regional setting.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research takes the form of case study research, and in particular can be seen as an 'instrumental case study'. This is a case which is explored in depth and analysed in order to help provide insight into an issue and contribute to refining or building theory (Stake 1995; Mills, Durepos & Wiebe 2010). In this case research questions included:

- What are the key enablers and challenges for First Nations artists in terms of their career trajectories in the performing arts, and in the development of new work?
- How can the development of more contemporary new works featuring Indigenous stories and creatives be best supported?

The research was conducted throughout the development phase of the *Bukal* production with part of that process coalescing with a review process undertaken following the *Proppa Solid* tour. Interviews were therefore conducted with actors involved in both productions. The research and evaluation process involved a partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, creatives and various members of the JUTE Theatre Company *Dare to Dream* program.

Multiple sources of data used included company documentation from the *Dare to Dream* program, interviews, fieldnotes from the creative development process for *Bukal* and recordings of post-show discussions. The research team designed a series of questions to guide interviews and discussions. However as is often the case, the interviews became more extended conversations exploring ideas and concerns raised throughout discussion.

An information and consent package was shared with participants and consent sought before interviews began. An interview protocol was designed to use with the First Nations artists and interviews were all conducted by the First Nations researcher. Artists were invited to discuss their: background and experiences in the arts, training and education, experiences of working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous arts companies, barriers and challenges faced, and factors deemed helpful for supporting First Nations artists. Discussions also focused on the development of contemporary new work with and by First Nations peoples. As the artists and creatives were professionals whose time and commitment needs to be valued, they were paid for their participation, as the interviews were optional activities in addition to their other work being carried out with JUTE. The interviews were recorded, and transcriptions or summaries of the data were produced. Participants were emailed a copy of transcripts and had opportunities to edit or further respond to the transcripts. They could make corrections or additions, although this occurred in very few cases.

The input from these discussions was complemented by reference to other contemporary literature and research, including other work commissioned or conducted by the Australia Council for the Arts.

CONTEXT

There is growing interest in Australia's First Nations arts, artists and stories, and associated awareness of the complexities related to supporting growth in this realm. These complexities relate particularly to matters around ownership, responsibilities, appropriate ways to develop and share First Nations arts works and the ways the broader sectors and non-Indigenous companies can do this with integrity. Integral to considering all these issues and opportunities is an acknowledgement of Australia's history of colonisation and post-colonial policies, and the ongoing impact of such on the lives of First Nations Australians. In Australia, as elsewhere, the voices of First Nations peoples were predominantly silenced and side-lined for generations with cultural knowledge and expression devalued and violated (Battiste 2002, Reynolds 1999, Smith 1998). As shifts have been made to acknowledge and restore Indigenous knowledge and heritage, recognition must be given to what has occurred, the removals, massacres, stolen generations, stolen wages, generations of structural poverty, inequity and limited access to education and pathways to 'privilege'.

However, there are many positive and important stories to be told about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's creativity, resilience and ingenuity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always made and created on country using processes and modes which are now identified as the arts, but which were just different ways of expressing, observing and sharing culture. As Aboriginal director/writer Wesley Enoch affirms, creativity and innovation have been part of Indigenous meaning making and cultures throughout history (Enoch 1994). The arts sector, like the education sector plays an important role through engaging in "open, exploratory, and creative inquiry in these difficult intersections" (Nakata et al 2012). Furthermore the arts have and can play a crucial role in healing, in restoring, in reconciling, and in generating new visions, pathways and possibilities.

In recognising the growth and interest in this work, the Australian Council work *Building Audiences* researched Australian perceptions and motivations for engaging with First Nations arts (Bridson et al 2015). This work found that Australians believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts are important to Australian culture, however many have limited exposure to Indigenous art experiences. There is a growing appetite for Indigenous Arts and arts audiences are highly motivated to engage with contemporary works.

The *Showcasing Creativity* study (Australia Council for the Arts 2016) indicated that the number of works being developed and staged by companies and festivals is still very low. The report identified that First Nations performing arts represented only 2% of 6000 works programmed in 2015 seasons. The *Creating Art* body of work now seeks to further interrogate the best ways to support the creation of new First Nations work for these audiences, companies and festivals.

FUNDING AND SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS PERFORMING ARTS

The development of Indigenous arts, including new contemporary performing arts works by Indigenous artists must be considered within a specific set of contextual features. It has been identified that for an increasing number of First Nations peoples, including those in regional and remote Australia, the arts and cultural activities are a significant source of income (Australia Council for the Arts 2017). It has been further identified that such practice has the potential to provide a

viable pathway towards economic empowerment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote towns, settlements and outstation (Throsby & Petetskaya 2016).

However, much of the support for Indigenous arts practice, particularly in the regions, is on the visual arts. For example, both state and federal government funding supports the operation of Art Centres, which typically focus on visual arts and forms such as painting, printmaking, ceramics and textiles. Researchers flag particular issues for the performing arts who typically “do not have access to widely available facilities to assist in the development of their creative work. They need the sorts of infrastructure facilities that can make a difference, especially for young people” (p. 6).

The structures to support Indigenous theatre development, the First Nations companies and programs to do so have fluctuated over time. In the 1990s three Indigenous theatre companies were established and supported – with Yirra Yaakin in Perth, Western Australia, ILBIJERRI theatre in Melbourne, Victoria and Kooemba Jdarra in Brisbane, Queensland. The companies have been subject to the shifts in funding priorities and tensions over funding and the purposes of art making (e.g. when the focus on ‘new and innovative work’ was prioritised over all else).

This is especially the case for Queensland, where JUTE – the case study company – is based. Queensland’s only Indigenous Theatre Company Kooemba Jdarra ran for 15 years, growing out of an initiative fostered by Contact Youth Theatre and nurturing the careers of Wesley Enoch, Deborah Mailman and many others. However this company closed when suffering funding losses from both state and federal governments in the late 2000s (Brisbane Times 2007; Glow and Johanson 2010). There is still no specific Indigenous theatre company in Queensland, even though the state is seeing a wealth of talent being trained up through ACPA (Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts) and other training organisations and entities. As BlakDance Executive Producer Merindah Donnelly and Alethea Beatson of DigiArts have identified:

Brisbane is one of the leaders in developing the youngest generation of First Nations artists and arts workers. Without pathways for these artists and producers in First Nations led organisations, projects and initiatives, the retention rate of our emerging First Nations artists is going to continue to decline as they leave Brisbane or the arts all together. (Alethea Beatson in Watts 2018).

What is also notable when analysing Indigenous population growth and employment in the arts and recreation sector via state and territory, is the concentration and growth of Indigenous populations in New South Wales and Queensland (See Figure 1 and Biddle & Markham 2017). Furthermore the same two states are resident to the highest numbers of Indigenous people working in the Arts & Recreation sector (Figure 2).

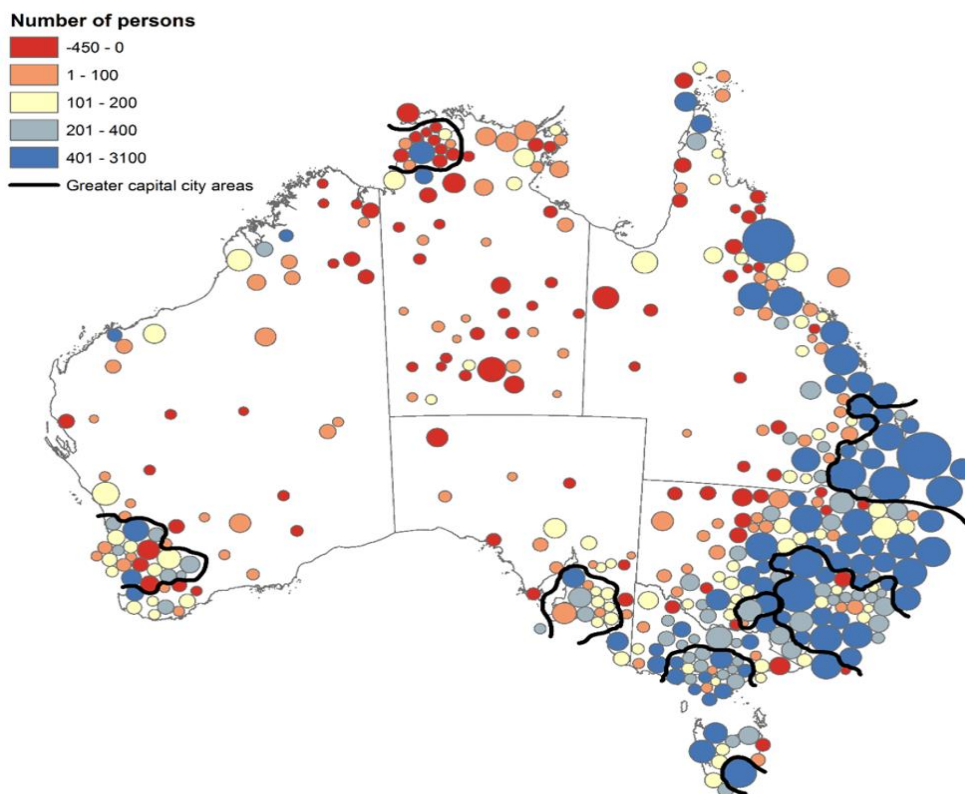


Figure 1 Indigenous population change by area. (ABS and Biddle & Markham 2017)

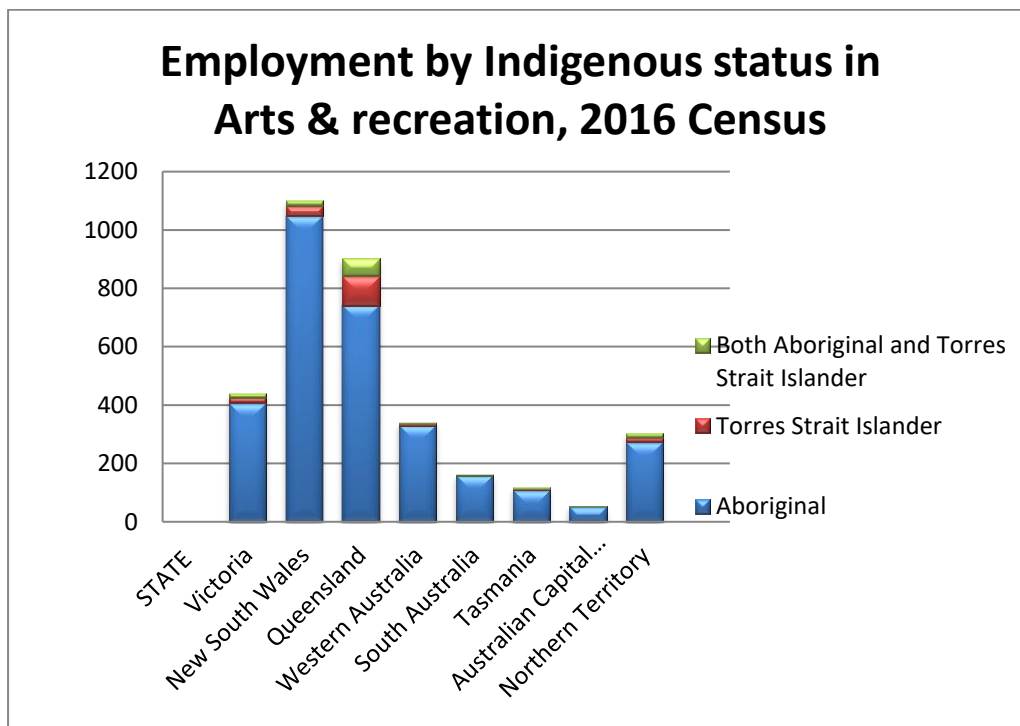


Figure 2 Indigenous employment in Arts & Recreation by State & Territory, ABS Census 2016
Employment, income & education

The economics of creating new performance works deserves special consideration and is also compounded. Throsby and others (Throsby 1994; Baumol & Bowen 1993; Towse & Khakee 2012) have identified key issues for funding theatre which has high fixed costs, variable demand certainty, and limited opportunity to reduce fixed costs and achieve scale economies through extended seasons or tours. Demand levels are not high enough to cover the real cost of ticket prices and so other forms of revenue and income are required to cover costs. Various forms of government subsidy, sponsorship and philanthropic funding are generally required to cover investment in the intensive costs involved in developing and staging new performing arts works. Co-productions or major support from government and other philanthropists and sponsors have been and will continue to be relied upon.

As to the purposes of Indigenous theatre, these are numerous but as creatives such as Wesley Enoch have reiterated, theatre and live performing arts offer up special spaces of shared experience and communion, of celebration, challenge and transformation:

The purpose of Indigenous theatre is two-fold; a celebration of a community and the challenging of a community. And I don't think that one is black and one is white. The challenge and the celebration happens on both sides, if there are in fact two sides. The audience has to place themselves within this dynamic and given the limited exposure in the mass media, Indigenous theatre is one of the few places that this can occur and also predominantly be controlled by Indigenous people. It is one of the few place we control our own representation. (Enoch 2001, p. 11)

TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To create new contemporary drama and dance work (beyond traditional and cultural dance that may be learnt and passed on within community) generally requires knowledge and skills acquired through some form of formal education and training. In the performing arts there are few opportunities outside of several metropolitan settings. So the context for learning in context is more limited than say for the visual arts, where artists in remote communities may learn and develop their art form through support within the community and the network of Arts Centres funded by states, territories and commonwealth governments. In those centres artists may be self or community taught, and able to stay in their communities to practice their art.

Professional performing artists in the theatre sector generally have to undergo years of training to develop their skills base. That may begin in formal schooling or out of school/after school contexts and then formal training at a university or performing arts school or centre. It is also the case that there is still a dearth of trained Indigenous professionals in the technical fields in particular (Glow and Johanson 2010) with very few trained Indigenous stage managers, lighting and sounds designers and technicians.

It is important to note the increase in the range of programs that focus on Indigenous performing arts that are now on offer. In Queensland, ACPA (Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts) has Cert II, Cert III, Cert IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Performing Arts and has a delivery partnership for certificate programs in some schools. NAISDA (Dance College) in NSW has a Diploma and Advanced Diploma in dance, and WAAPA has a Certificate IV Program in Aboriginal Theatre. In the case of generic performing arts training programs, such as those offered by NIDA

and other Universities, TAFE and other post-graduate education providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student engagement is encouraged as part of their standard degree courses and there are some specialized courses available.

However most of these courses and institutions are based in capital cities and other major centres. This means that for young Indigenous people who wish to pursue a career in the performing arts, they generally have to move away from home. Given the history of disempowerment and displacement and impact on the experience of education many Indigenous people have had, it also means that many Indigenous people have had fractured and curtailed education pathways within the formal schooling sector. The pathways into arts training and development for Indigenous young people and artists are therefore extremely diverse, disjointed and often feature overcoming great challenges.

CAREER PATHWAYS FOR INDIGENOUS CREATIVES

There is limited literature on Indigenous 'arts' careers and capacity building. There is value however, in reviewing some of the recent research regarding career development in the arts and creative industries before considering other factors arising from this case study research. Work by Bennett and Hennekam (2018) which involved survey responses from over 600 creative industries workers indicated that entry into these fields is not based on expectations of high salaries or stable work, but that people are drawn in because of a passion or sense of 'calling' for their creative practice.

As in other workforces experiencing growing casualization, many creative industry workers are engaged in a series of multiple employments (Bennett, 2007, p. 135). Within the context of the creative industries, artistic careers are frequently "a self-managed patchwork of concurrent and overlapping employment arrangements" (Bennett & Bridestock, 2015, p. 264), short term engagements and portfolios of work (Cunningham and Higgs 2010). Securing creative work tends to rely on reputation, networks and connections. Of great significance to this study is that network membership is often crucial to securing and maintaining employment. However these networks can be difficult to access, are impacted by age and social status (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018) and can appear exclusionary, especially early on in people's careers (Smith and McKinlay 2009).

Negotiating a career in the creative industries involves ongoing self-authorship and identity work, and this is often impacted by aspects such as family relationships and the expectations of family and friends (Bennett & Hennekam 2018). These are factors that are likely to be highly significant for Indigenous artists and creatives.

THE CREATIVE TRAJECTORY – PROFILES OF FIRST NATIONS CREATIVES

To consider some of the career trajectories of First Nations creatives, the following section presents short profiles about a number of artists/creatives involved in the JUTE Theatre Company's *Proppa Solid* or *Bukal* productions. The focus is on describing their background, training and professional experience, and achievements. Following these profiles, the report examines a range of themes and concepts that were identified from across their stories and discussions. (A more extended case study of one of the creatives PJ Rosas is included in Appendix A).

Nazaree Dickerson



Nazaree Dickerson is a Noongar and Burmese Actor and Director from Western Australia and is now based in Melbourne. She has more than 15 years experience as a theatre maker and 20 years as a children's workshop facilitator. Nazaree has worked with ILBIJERRI Theatre Company in *Chopped Liver*, for JUTE in *Proppa Solid* 2017, and in 2018 toured with *The Season*. She was selected to participate in ILBIJERRI's Blackwright Creators Program for 2019 and also toured with JUTE in *The Longest Minute*.

Leroy Parsons



Leroy Parson is from New South Wales and the Yuin nation. Within that, his mob are Walbunja, who are from Batemans Bay. He grew up on the South Coast. He first got into drama at high school taking a drama elective for part of his HSC. Leroy studied at VCA for two years in the School of Drama. He has worked professionally since 2000 and appeared in numerous theatre productions such as Jane Harrison's acclaimed *Stolen*, touring to London, Hong Kong and Tokyo; Richard Frankland's *Conversations with the Dead* in ILBIJERRI/Playbox's *Blak Inside* season and Barry Dicken's *Claustrophobia* for La Mama & *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* for the Old Van Theatre Company & Latje Latje dance group. Leroy has also volunteered his time to read for Actors for Refugees. He has taught acting for Swinburne University Indigenous Performing Arts Course. Leroy performed in the JUTE productions of *Proppa Solid* in 2014, 2016 and 2017.

Mark Sheppard



Mark Sheppard is a Muluridgi-Mbarbarrum man hailing from Mareeba in the Atherton Tablelands. A graduate from WAAPA, he has gone on to work with companies such as; Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre Co. (Perth), Kooemba Jdarra (Brisbane), DeBase Productions (Brisbane), Circus Oz (Melbourne) and JUTE Theatre Company in Cairns. It was during his time with DeBase Productions that he created his one-man show, *Chasing the Lollyman*, which toured extensively around Australia. After time based in Melbourne and Brisbane, Mark returned to live in Far North Queensland in 2017 and as well as working with JUTE on *Proppa Solid* (2014, 2016 & 2017), has since performed in *The Longest Minute*. Mark has been commissioned by JUTE to develop a new work – working title *Synaesthesia Pt 2*.

PJ Rosas



PJ Rosas is a Yidinji Mbarbrum man whose people are originally from the Atherton Rainforests. He is a stage manager who works from North Queensland and Melbourne and one of the partners of the Slippery Eel Productions. After early working life in education and employment he completed training at Swinburne University and VCA in production management. He has worked extensively for over three decades as a Stage Manager, tour and production manager for many arts organisations including ILBIJERRI, and festivals across Australia and internationally. He has worked for major events such as the World Indigenous Peoples Conference, and the 2018 Commonwealth Games Festival. He has been tour manager for *Proppa Solid* 2016 and 17 and for *Bukal* in 2018.

Yvette Walker



Yvette Walker is a descendant of the Waanyi people of the West and North of Queensland and Creative Producer with JUTE Theatre Company for 2018-19. She is a First Nations arts & entertainment professional who relocated back to Cairns in 2018 after 17 years living and working in Brisbane and nationally. Yvette is an acting alumni student of the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts. She has created a dynamic career in roles such as programmer, casting director, producer, writer, actor, dramaturg and director, working for the likes of Playwriting Australia, ACPA, Burragubba Productions, Island Vibe Festival, Reconciliation Queensland, State Library of Qld, Kooemba Jdarra and more. She has been professionally mentored by formidable female Indigenous arts identities including Rhoda Roberts and Leah Purcell. Yvette was creative producer for *Bukal* with JUTE introducing new protocols and ways of working. Yvette was appointed as the first Indigenous female judge on the panel of Queensland's flagship Theatre Awards, the Matildas (2018 and 2019).

Andrea James



Andrea is a Yorta Yorta/Kurnai woman and graduate of VCA. She was Artistic Director of Melbourne Workers' Theatre 2001-2008 where she is best known for her play *Yanagai!* *Yanagai*, which premiered at Playbox in 2004, and has toured to the UK. Relocating to Sydney, Andrea was Aboriginal Arts Development Officer at Blacktown Arts Centre 2010-2012 and Aboriginal Producer at Carriageworks from 2012-2016. She was a recipient of British Council's Accelerate Program for Aboriginal Arts Leaders in 2013 and was awarded Arts NSW Aboriginal Arts Fellowship to write a play about Evonne Goolagong. Andrea performed in and co-wrote *Bright World* with Elise Hearst at Theatreworks 2015 and directed her play *Winyanboga Yurringa* at Carriageworks and Geelong Performing Arts Centre, 2016. Her short play, *Blacktown Angels* premiered at Sydney Festival 2016 for Urban Theatre Project. She was a collaborator in Moogahlin Performing Arts *Broken Glass* for the Sydney Festival in 2017. She was commissioned by JUTE to write *Bukal* as well as directing the premiere performance.

Taeg Twist



Taeg Twist is a Birri Gubba woman from Thursday Island and is studying a Bachelor of Creative Arts degree at CQUniversity in Cairns. *Bukal* was her professional stage debut. Taeg has extensive experience in the performing arts, particularly as a singer/songwriter. She has performed in the QANTAS and Gondwana Choirs, with performances at the Shanghai World Expo, Oprah Winfrey Show in Sydney and Woodford Dreaming Festival. Taeg has also developed her skills and experience through performances with the Cairns Choral Society as 'Rizzo' in *Grease* and in *Avenue Q*.

Maurial Spearim



Maurial Spearim is an Indigenous woman from the Gamilaraay, Kooma, Muruwari nation. A VCA graduate with a Bachelor of Dramatic Arts Degree, her performance credits include her self-penned one-woman show *BlaaQ Catt* (New Wave Festival 2016), *We Get It* (Elbow Room/Neon Festival MTC 2015), *Wentworth* (Foxtel 2013/2015), *Secret River* (2015), *Redfern Now* tele-movie (2015), *Move It Mob Style* (NITV), *Who Stole the Sole* (2013-2015), *BalaaBalaa Yuli-Gi dancer* (2015), *Skin Choir Songlines* (Aboriginal Music Corporation 2012-2014) & *Body Armor* (state and national tour, ILBIJERRI Theatre Company 2010-2013). Maurial received a Green Room Award 2015 nomination: Best Female Performer (Independent Theatre) for *We Get It*. In 2018 she finished shooting the feature film *Emu Runner*, filmed on location in Brewarrina, NSW.

Alexis West



Alexis West is a proud Birri Gubba, Wakka Wakka, Australian South Sea Islander, Caucasian writer, poet, director, performer, artist, collaborator and facilitator. She has been a resident at Vitals Statistix and co-host on Radio Adelaide's Yarning Country. Alexis co-curated the Australian Theatre Forum 2017 with Steve Mayhew. She has collaborated to create theatre with No Strings Theatre of Disability and co-written *Sista Girl* with Elena Carapetis for State Theatre South Australia and Yirra Yaakin. Alexis was engaged to work on *Bukal* during creative development, and for the premiere season and tour.

ENABLERS AND CHALLENGES – CONCEPTS EMERGING FROM THE DATA

This case study research sought to identify the enablers and challenges related to creating a career in theatre and performing arts for First Nations artists. The research was based on artists associated with the JUTE *Dare to Dream* program, and a series of interviews and focus group discussions. The recordings of these sessions were transcribed and initial coding undertaken. This data set was also complemented by notes from fieldwork and discussions. The first pass of data reading focused on three key questions, these being:

- What have been the enablers and sources of support for creating a career and work in the performing arts?
- What have been the challenges and difficulties encountered?
- What dilemmas have the artists dealt with and what experiences have been significant?

From there, key concepts were named, and where there were similar ideas expressed in multiple interviews, these were identified and clustered. The data was then revisited and analysed again together with the other research team member, and concepts confirmed and refined. The following section describes and analyses these concepts, with selected quotes used to provide insight into the specific experiences and examples from the creatives involved. What is apparent is that enablers and challenges are often different experiences which sit on a continuum related to certain key concepts and so they are shared initially through the concepts.

PERFORMER IDENTITY - MOTIVATION, INSPIRATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT

To conceive of having a career in the arts someone has to know that it is possible, believe they can do it, with the skills and abilities to enable that and the motivation and commitment to make it happen. Previous research has suggested that most adults who become involved in the arts have some exposure to such as children, and that early, positive experiences can stimulate ongoing interest and involvement (Orend & Keegan 1996).

Early influences, support and role models are important and may include family members or other role models. For the artists interviewed for this study, early experiences were highly influential, some in providing positive exposure to the arts and opportunities to have some firsthand involvement:

I've been singing since I was young, my family's very musical, if we weren't playing instruments, we were singing...

Teachers and others in the community or visiting the community were very influential as well.

[who was influential?] My high school drama teacher. Because I always wanted to do drama and then when I did it in Year 11 and 12, my senior years, she really pushed me and encouraged me. Even when I was shitting myself about performing out in public as part of our assessment, she's like, no, you get out there and you do that. 'This is what you want to do, you know you can do it - you're right. You know what you're doing'. ... She really inspired me to do my drama and my family were really encouraging, as well. They were like, what, you want to do drama? Well, do drama. What, you want to go and do that course? Oh okay, well you going to be alright? Yep, go and do it. If that's what you want to do, we support you.

In some cases, influential experiences came from the young person developing a belief or determination as a result of negative experiences too. The perceptions and discouragement by others can present a significant 'de-motivator', especially when others have limiting expectations for Indigenous youth. This becomes then a challenge that has to be overcome.

I remember at 13 I walked into [a drama training program] with a fricking feather boa around my neck and said, 'I want to be an actress'. They just laughed me out of the room. They thought, 'what is this'? I had headshots my little sister had taken. That really broke me. I thought, I could never break into this. Then I got older and realised that I already had the answers. I already had the strength. I already had the talent. I hesitated for so many years because I thought I wasn't good enough.

Exposure to theatre, seeing Indigenous performers and having early performing experiences are important for young people to discover this is their 'thing' and form a vision of an arts future as something that is 'possible'. As well as school experiences, opportunities to take part in co-curricula programs, arts groups and ensembles can be seminal early experiences:

When I was 10 I accidentally ran into a room where they were auditioning for Godwana Choirs. I was running late for a different class. But I auditioned and got through and then I went to Woodford singing at the Dreaming Festival.

Often participants had 'gateway' experiences, which can be very important if family have limited access to 'cultural capital' as described by Bourdieu and others (McCarthy et al 2001). Experiences of theatre and seeing First Nations artists and creatives on stage and screen provided a model of possibilities for several of the artists interviewed:

So my first experience with Aboriginal theatre was in year six. We had *Bindjareb Pinjarra* come to our school. That's the first time that I'd ever seen black fellows on stage.

It didn't become relevant to me until I saw *Bran Nue Dae* in Cairns and then I moved to Perth to audition for *Corrogation Road*. ... And one of my favourite movies of all time was the *Fringe Dwellers* and Aunty Justine Saunders Bob Maza and all those fantastic artists that could finally give us a black face on screen.

Having opportunities to actually perform and participate takes this interest to the next level, with most of the artists interviewed realising by their late teens that performing or having a career in the arts was something they were good at and wanted to pursue:

So anyway, drama, high school, HSC - I finished that. I liked doing drama, it was something I always wanted to do and I thought, how do I continue this on? I had never lived in the city. I'd visited [during the day in] Sydney quite a lot as a child. So, I found out about a course in Sydney which was at Amaroo Skillshare, which was in Redfern. So, I went and did that...

Like many performing artists, the First Nations performers/arts-workers involved in these interviews are all multi-skilled and flexible cultural workers, who have a diversity of views, talents and experiences, often developed from their youth.

I'm a performing artist, all aspects, dance, sing, play music, I dance, I direct, I choreograph, so I try to focus on the acting/writing side of things, a bit of dramaturgy, whatever part of the arts that I can be a part of.

For a number of the participants, recalling their own experiences has affirmed the value of a program such as *Dare to Dream* and seeing plays like *Proppa Solid* and *Bukal*. Through the programs touring to schools in regional, remote and very remote areas, young people have an opportunity to see and directly experience First Nations stories, representations, and role models they are not often able to experience otherwise. The experience of theatre also allows them to do it in a 'special way'. Through seeing engaging live performances of stories from First Nations peoples and cultures, they may be able to relate to these experiences through the power of live performance:

it's important that those kids out there have access to this. To these stories. It's important that they see their stories up on stage.

... It's very important, because it makes them think. It really does make them think. Some might be a little bit traumatic sometimes. They might have a laugh at certain points in the show or they might - but it's important that they see their stories, that they are represented. That's what they need, because they're not represented on TV - it's rare. They might be every now and then represented on TV or in film but there's this glass wall there. It's important that they're represented live there where they can actually see it, smell it, hear it and touch it if they want. It's right there, live theatre.

Seeing such performances can provide young people with access to this 'living' knowledge but also to potential role models of careers and ways of working. The examples of the artists involved in this research confirmed the importance of early exposure to and experiences in performing arts. Through seeing, experiencing and 'having a go' they were able to learn about possibilities and believe this was something they could pursue. The influence of teachers at school played a significant role for most, as well as those from home and community. Some had relatives who were musical or had some performance experience, though there was little to no mention of specific First Nations cultural experience from home and community.

TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE

In working towards a career as contemporary, performing arts and theatre 'professionals', the majority of the artists interviewed had engaged with some formal arts training and education. While it may have been possible in the past (or in other cultural forms) to forge a professional career arising from non-formalised learning, talent and experience, that is rarely the case now when it comes to professional practice in the performing arts. What is clear from the data is the important role played by a range of training programs in theatre and performance, from school arts programs, youth arts programs and short courses through to training across VET and higher education. Having programs that are run by and for Indigenous performers and/or have a focus on Indigenous arts has also been crucial for engaging and encouraging these First Nations creatives. The absence of such lead to experiences being alienating, and some artists reported leaving or dropping out of programs where there was no Indigenous content, staff or other students.

Most formal education systems and programs are premised on non-Indigenous, 'white' models and content (Moreton-Robinson 2004). To promote access and participation, an important role has been played by specific programs targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Furthermore of import are those featuring the involvement of First Nations leaders, role models and teachers:

I went to high school I signed up for a school drama show, did a little role in that. Then my uncle who was in town just coming off doing a show, a film or something - I can't remember - but he mentioned to me that Yirra Yaakin was starting a youth program. I was like, great how can I sign up? So I signed up.

But I got into the Aboriginal Music Theatre training program, which is now ACPA in Brisbane, then I got into WAAPA Theatre course.

Accessing performing arts training often means that the participants have had to move away from home. The upheaval and difficulties of such transitions can be relieved when there are family members and relatives in those places the participant has to move to but this is not always possible:

So, I applied for that and kind of last minute, as you do, got accepted into the course. Then I went, oh geez, what am I going to do? I have to get to Melbourne, I've never been. Where do I stay? I don't really know anyone in Melbourne.

Once in a program, staying the course is not always easy and is influenced by the support and interactions with others. For example, being part of a cohort and not being the only Indigenous student can be a key enabler:

... the first year was great because it was an all Indigenous class. We were mob from all over, mainly Victoria. We were all learning something new and fresh, theatre. We also had an understanding that when you're away from mob, you look after each other.

For this participant, in another course and context, it was much more difficult when being the only Indigenous person in the course and when the course included no Indigenous content or use of Indigenous plays/texts.

So, I was going to leave at the second year halfway through and someone said, listen, you're halfway through second year. You might as well just stay until the - finish the year out and then decide. So, what I did was - at the end of 1999, we had our final student show. The other thing too about it is we didn't know anything about - they weren't teaching black theatre. ... I couldn't really relate to any of the shows that we were doing. There was no depth or meaningful thing.

For the artists involved in this research education and training experiences beyond schooling played significant roles, with the opportunity to build their skills, experiences and networks, often through specific programs that targeted and supported Indigenous students.

DISCONTINUOUS STUDY AND WORK PATHWAYS

While most of the participants had undertaken formal studies, in many cases these were not completed, or their learning pathways were fractured. For many Indigenous people the longer term impacts of colonization, institutionalised racism and poverty have influenced study pathways and it can be difficult to cultivate a sense of 'belonging' within formal education programs:

... then I auditioned for the three year diploma course there and got in. So I started that in 2003 and didn't graduate. ... I was three years at that school but I did two and a half years of my diploma and then dropped out for personal reasons, didn't have a lot of support in terms

of an Aboriginal liaison worker or anything like that in the school because they just didn't have those things. So that was probably a huge barrier for me finishing.

The impact of these experiences was that some of the artists did not necessarily have the final 'award' or piece of paper for all the study they had undertaken. Without the formal qualifications sometimes confidence can be impacted when it comes to navigating established systems. It can mean that valuable life experience may not be appropriately recognised:

So when you read a position description the language that's used - even if it's an Indigenous identified position - the language that's still used makes it so daunting. So even someone like me who could certainly take over a directorial role or a managerial role or even a team manager role, I look at that and - I'm smart but it intimidates me.

The importance of programs to mentor and support young artists and transition into the industry was identified as being an area to develop:

[I'd like to be] facilitating or helping to direct or directing a national program to help young First Nations artists feel safe navigating their way through the industry. My uncle ... rest in peace, who passed away - we created a foundation. ... But the intention of that foundation was that all royalties from Uncle's work over the years will go towards supporting kids that come from remote and regional areas to study in the city, to have a host family, to be linked in with community to support them in their journey so that they don't feel vulnerable.

They don't have to stumble their way through the industry. They get the professional mentoring that they need to be really successful and not like some of these young kids that get a role in a really big movie and then they get left to the side. So they've been in the spotlight for five minutes and then what do they do with this big head, with this ego that's been built up? We've seen that time and time again with young First Nations artists. I don't want that to happen to them anymore.

What was clear from the interviews but also talking to the creatives about their work and lives was this theme of discontinuity was also evident in the fragmented nature of their arts work. Most had moved in and out of professional work and moved to find work, including moving states:

it's really hard to get main stage work in [city name] as a black fellow. You're not really known by the Melbourne clique or the Sydney clique. That's where most of the work is for black artists. So it was a natural progression for me to go, alright I need more opportunities. I've got to move to Melbourne.

As many creatives find, work in the arts can often be short-term contracts and jobs, with continuity of employment and income proving a source of ongoing tension and stress:

It's a hard thing to make money in. That's hard when people say 'It's so great you're doing what you love'. ... As much as you love doing it, once a season's done, it's done. And money is such a massive thing! That's the thing that crushes people in this industry. Trying to keep on top of getting your bills done while doing acting or anything in performing arts.

Other decisions had been made by artists at times to stop consciously looking for work in the arts and to take 'safe jobs' where they could earn a regular income. A number of the artists also wanted to give back to their communities through their work and complemented their arts work with youth and community work:

I did youth work for the next few years with ... Council as well. ... Then yeah 2016 I was working as a project officer at a community health organisation. I got a call out of the blue from - who was it - I think it might have been Lisa Maza or someone that knew me and they said, hey what are your availabilities like.

To be able to accept the job with JUTE the creatives were leaving homes, partners, families (and pets!) for weeks or months. Traveling for work places particular pressure on relationships and those with family responsibilities. It needs to be acknowledged therefore that social support structures are required to engage in creative practice for many performing arts who wish to maintain professional practice. This is compounded when artists have to leave home for months for touring programs.

It was also clear that nearly all the creatives while engaged in this particular production in a particular role, were not only multi-skilled creatives working variously performers, directors, writers, dancers, facilitators, producers and more, but also had moved in and out of other roles across their working lives.

FIRST NATIONS CULTURES AND STORIES

A key motivation for the artists working with JUTE's *Dare to Dream* program has been the desire to share First Nations culture and stories including their own. They affirmed the importance of recognizing that Australian First Nations cultures are among the oldest storytelling cultures in the world, with many, many stories to be told and growing appetite and audience for the telling of them.

We are the oldest storytellers in the world. If anyone is going to tell anyone how to do it, it should be us telling others how to do it.

There are many different ways of telling stories, with varying purposes. From all the interview participants there was an enthusiasm for more First Nations stories to be told and a need for this to encompass the breadth of experiences in truthful, authentic, honest and creative ways:

If we sugar-coat it, they're not going to know the real reason why we ... are doing this or why - the way we are or some of our people are. They're not going to understand why half our mob are like the way they are. Why some of our people don't work, are drunks, are alcoholics, are dying. That's why we need to tell our stories because it's from history - from invasion day. We still - you know what, we've got so much stories to tell, just because you've seen one story up about a mob who are dealing with alcohol or suicide - that's just one story. We've got hundreds of thousands of thousands of stories to tell like that, that are different in their own unique way. The only way we can truly heal as well and also have this understanding or them mob knowing where we come from, is for us to tell our stories and tell them our way.

Of great importance is that theatre is seen as an important vehicle for telling First Nations stories, including the difficult ones, and can also be a means to help with healing. The focus now is on First Nations self-determination and leadership in the creative sector, and beyond, and for partnerships involved to take the lead from First Nations peoples in respectful ways:

Also listen to us, they're our stories. We're like the oldest storytellers in the world, us mob. We all have to tell our stories. We've got to tell our stories our way and we have to tell it with truth and honesty and respect.

As well as telling the difficult stories, there was also an affirmation of the abilities of Indigenous artists to create new imaginative works that may not be Indigenous specific as well as positive aspects of Indigenous cultures, such as the use of humour,

Indigenous humour – it's the biggest thing ... That's a massive difference – the humour – the way you interact with each other.

There were also suggestions that theatre practice and practitioners could learn a lot from Indigenous cultures, and learning from such could assist not only in new work creation but with exploring what it means to 'decolonise' theatre process and practice.

Mention was made as well about the need to consider audiences and access to Indigenous work – for example most professional theatre is expensive and the price of theatre tickets and location often results in Indigenous artists telling stories for non-Indigenous audiences. The creatives we spoke to felt it was important that the stories and work First Nations artists create should be made accessible to other Indigenous audiences, as well as more broadly.

THE CHALLENGES AND ONGOING IMPACT OF COLONISATION

Participants in this research discussed the different ways that their families and lives were still impacted by Australia's colonial history. Specific mention was made of intergenerational trauma and how this played out for them personally, for their families and communities.

My family has had three generations stolen. So that's my mother's, my grandfather's and my great-grandfather's. That's something that's really affected me and my identity as an Aboriginal woman. But I grew up in ... not knowing much.

This history is very much a living history and the ongoing resonance of inter-generational trauma, poverty, and disempowerment is acknowledged by some of the interviewees. In families and communities there are layers of effect which impact on lives in direct and indirect ways. It is important to recognise the impact of removals through experiences such as family violence, mental health and addiction issues and more (Atkinson et al 2014).

My mum was stolen when she was two. Then she was really dispossessed, displaced and traumatised from that. So she made poor choices in her relationships. So we saw a lot of violence and stuff as a young person and in our neighbourhood.

These types of experiences can impact on continuity of schooling and education, young people may not necessarily have had a 'stable' and consistent home base and support to be able to continue work and study. Early parenthood and family responsibilities can also result, and this was part of the experience of some participants interviewed:

I was a bit of a rebel as a teenager. So you know, I kind of went off the rails for a few years after that. I did that one show at 13. My mum moved me ... because there was a lot of violence and stuff in our family and in our community. So she wanted to get us away. So I met the father of my son. I had my son when I was 17. ... Then I was just - I was a mum for the next few years.

As well as having children younger and having more children, the Indigenous population is more likely to die younger. All of this is highly significant when considering family and cultural

responsibilities and notions of custodianship. The age structure of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is significantly younger than the non-Indigenous population (see Figure 3) (Australian Health Minister 2017). In 2011, the median age for Indigenous Australians was 22 years compared with 38 years for non-Indigenous Australians, and 36% of Indigenous Australians were aged 0–14 years compared with 18% of non-Indigenous Australians. The proportion of Indigenous people aged 65 years and over was 3.4% whereas for the total Australian population was 14.2%.

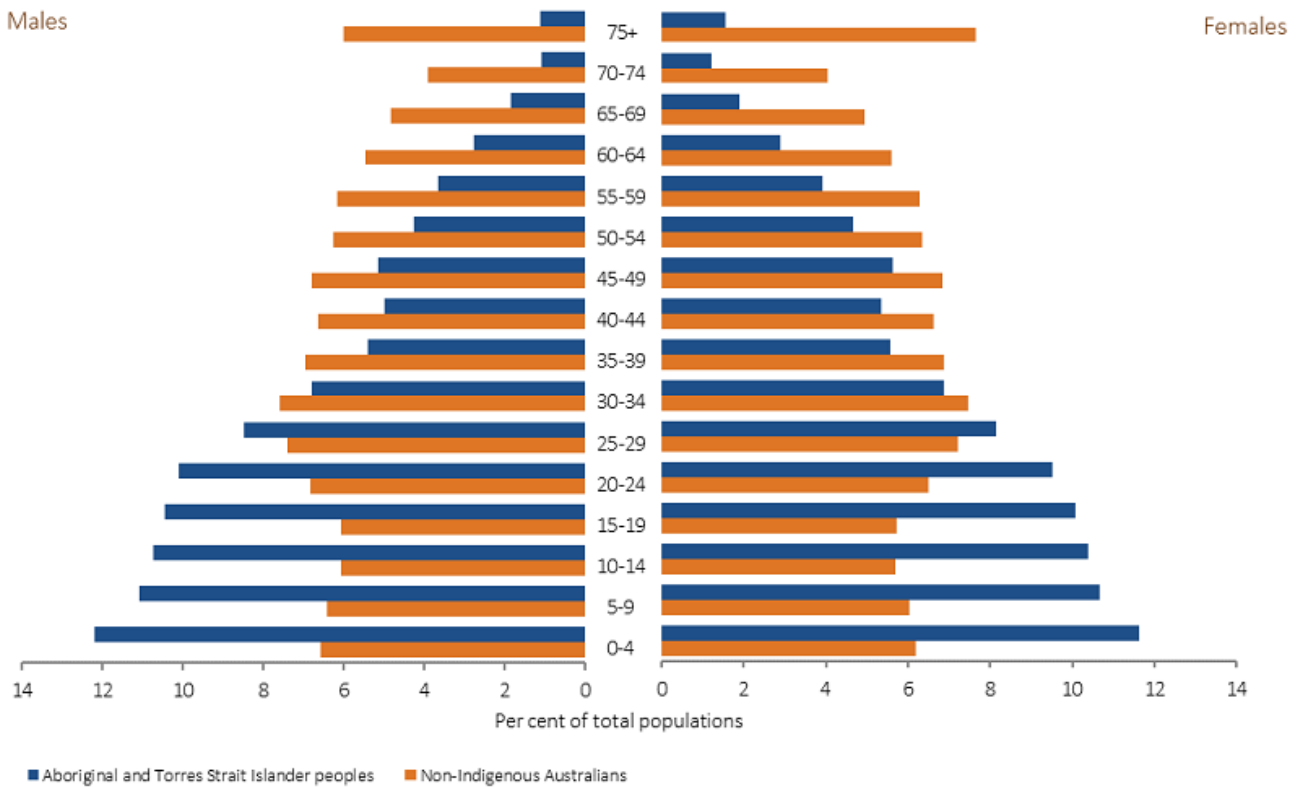


Figure 3 Age distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians, by Indigenous status and sex, 2017 (projections) (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2017).

The growth of a young Indigenous population is a great opportunity, and means there are more young artists who will be emerging. However there are also implications with there being younger death rates for Indigenous peoples. It means younger people often have to deal with the realities of death, grief and sorry business more often and at earlier ages than the non-Indigenous population. There are fewer older people and elders in some communities. All of this can impact in very real ways in the work place and the need to take time out for 'sorry business' and to honour family responsibilities.

FIRST NATIONS REPRESENTATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

For Indigenous artists, their identity can attract a weight of responsibility and artists interviewed often felt that weight when seen as a 'representative' of one's culture.

We don't just represent mob here, we represent everyone. All of our peoples everywhere. That's why it's treated with care, respect, honesty, truthfulness - handle with care.

That ongoing responsibility is not welcomed by all and there is some resistance to this role as well:

So I've taken the idea of trying to be an educator of white people about Aboriginal people off my stress list because I just want to tell the stories. So it's become about telling the stories for me rather than being that or the other and that's liberating.

Telling First Nations stories and being on country 'brings things up' and may generate layers of feeling. For some of the artists this was particularly the case when touring with shows to some of the remote Indigenous communities:

The impact for me personally was that I, myself forgot how many Aboriginal people live and how disadvantaged they are by living in those communities and what they don't have out there, which they should have. They're so remote and stuff and you just go, 'what do you do?' There's a lot of things that I took for granted.

The First Nations artist also has to grapple with the politics of identity and representation, dealing with racism, stereotypes and judgements about skin colour and expectations of cultural knowledge:

I guess I played into that, all those things that bring us mob down like I'm a half-caste. How can I represent myself as an Aboriginal artist when I'm a 'half-caste'? How can I talk about culture and country when I've lived off country for 17 years? How can I talk about my identity as a black woman when I don't know [my country's] language? These things held me back.

A positive thread across the interviews was the willingness of the First Nations creatives to step up and take on leadership and mentor roles. Experienced creatives express the strong desire to share with and guide young artists, to help them avoid some of the pitfalls they experienced:

But now I'm at a place where I'm ready to take on more, not just performer but I want to start doing that arts advocacy work again.

The mentoring - I'd love to be mentoring and just - because I think, too, we need to be careful, our people that working in the arts, that we don't get sucked into the vortex of what white theatre is or what white politics is.

THE FIRST NATIONS PERFORMING ARTS SECTOR AND ECOLOGY

What was clear from the artists involved in the JUTE productions was their awareness of there being a network of First Nations artists in the Performing Arts sector and this ecology was concurrently national and localised. The concept of 'ecologies' has been increasingly used in research in the arts, theatre and creativity fields (Kershaw, 2007; Makeham, Hadley & Kwok 2012; Bridson et al, 2015; Harris, 2016; Hadley 2017) as it recognises the different players, entities, resources, places, relationships and energies that are needed to sustain activity and life within a

system. Navigating your way within the ecology, and finding work often arises from a combination of word of mouth, connecting into the network and chance:

... it's weird how you can meet the right people at the right time. Because when I decided to leave ... , a mate of mine calls me and goes, there's this director here looking for you, he's a black fella and I've told him about you. I told him you were at xxxxxx and I've told him that you want to leave. He wants to call you about this gig. So, as soon as I left ...

Interviewer:

So, this black fella grapevine has really worked - that word of mouth...

A common theme in discussions with First Nations artists is the important role played by First Nations mentors, role-models and brokers in the industry and they have been crucial for transition into professional arts practice:

Over the last two years I've met so many people who I can't believe I didn't know earlier in my career who I could have really lent on. People like Melody Reynolds. People like Uncle Kelton Pell. These people, they're not only my countrymen but they've got so much experience. They've got so much knowledge. They've got so much - things they can mentor me in.

There is an extended network across the country of Indigenous creatives, and knowing them and being connected can be a very positive thing. However if you are on the outer or don't know people it can appear like a closed or exclusive group. It is great when you feel like you 'in', it's not great when you're 'not in':

I didn't know how warm it would be on the inside because when you're on the outside looking in, it can feel really, really cold and almost impenetrable. But little did I know that was not being done on purpose to me. That was me not having confidence to step up and say, look at me; I'm here. ...

I actually didn't know how to contact them. There was no one. I wouldn't have felt comfortable just calling up a theatre company going, do you have so and so's number? I've never met him before but I want to have a yarn. So part of that was me being not great at networking.

There were also concerns expressed that there are Indigenous people who become very powerful in the industry, and that they can become power players and gatekeepers who might play favourites or lose touch with the grassroots. However such concerns or critiques are also relevant beyond the realm of Indigenous arts, acknowledging the tensions at play for those who assume influential positions making decisions about where funds should be directed and who is funded.

It was also reinforced that there is no one-way of being Indigenous or having an Indigenous voice. Consultation in Indigenous communities not straight forward, there is no single view, and it is unfair to expect such either. This view has elsewhere been expressed by Indigenous leaders in the arts community:

I also talked to elders and community members about this issue. I can tell you now there is no consensus. Blackfellas are like a pack of whitefellas sometimes - no one can agree who

should be the leader, who has the numbers, and what policy is the right one to dump.
(Enoch 2015)

There are a range of matters raised in this section related to First Nations arts networks and ecologies. This discussion highlights the importance of the networks, which extend nationally, and the issues for emerging artists and those not connected to it, to find ways in and for mentoring and support to be cultivated.

STRUCTURES, COMPANIES AND WAYS OF WORKING

Different models and support within the industry are needed to tell First Nations stories in 'authentic', appropriate and engaging ways. With there not being many Indigenous performing arts companies that means non-Indigenous companies need to consider how they work with First Nations artists and layers of history and implications. There remains work to be done in dealing with the legacy of 'big white bosses', for more Indigenous artists to develop skills and experiences across the whole spectrum of the performing arts business. The artists interviewed identified that in most arts companies they've worked for, the individuals who make key decisions, control funding and management processes are still mostly non-Indigenous. Sometimes the Indigenous artists felt uncomfortable and 'judged' by non-Indigenous directors and production teams:

Sometimes with white directors and coming in while we're working you need to tell us why you're there. It can feel like you're checking up on us, going to get up us – the mission man all over again.

When the Indigenous artists were placed in positions of 'power' they had sometimes found that others didn't always totally accept them in those roles, for examples for some teachers and students when the *Dare to Dream* team were on tour:

I noticed that in the main the teachers were non-Indigenous and so the kids associate positions of power with non-Indigenous people and so they couldn't believe that we were there to teach them stuff, and not just play time, as [from their experience] that's migloo's job.

When developing new Indigenous works, or working with Indigenous casts, different ways of working may be required compared to standard theatre making and production models. This requires companies and funding organisations to think, work, program and (perhaps fund) differently:

The most important thing is that telling black fella stories in the so-called box, we don't fit in that. We don't fit in that box. We're like - we're not a box, a rectangle, we're kind of hexagon or something, not even that. Because black fella, we all different shapes and sizes when it comes to our stories, it's like you got to fit into ours. We've been fitting into this so-called box ... working within the constraints of your box and your work structure. You actually have to work in our work structure and how we work.

... Also listen to us, they're our stories. We're like the oldest storytellers in the world, us mob. We all have to tell our stories. We've got to tell our stories our way and we have to tell it with truth and honesty and respect.

I know a lot of the big companies, arts companies, in Australia hesitate to do black work or commission new Aboriginal works because there could very well be that sensitive content that they don't know how to navigate, they don't know how to care for. That's a barrier for us telling our stories. ...

When questioned about what counts when an organisation works with First Nations content and artists, interviewees has some helpful suggestions regarding what is important:

For me it's definitely putting your relationships with your artists first as people and as black fellows.

So I guess an ideal organisation would be one that has implemented cultural structures into the structure of their business and not using this old western business structure ... It's that thing of trying to make black fellows always fit the western model, instead of us going but our model is older and was successful for thousands of years. How about you use some of our structures?

Take some inspiration from our kinship structures, from our community structures, our hierarchies, matriarchies and patriarchies in our communities. They've been working. They do work. ... Then the artwork comes after that. But it's the people leading it through culture - cultural way!

Some participants preferred working with 'Indigenous companies', while appreciating the importance of non-Indigenous companies and the 'majors' staging Indigenous works. A number of artists were passionate about what it takes to do it well and avoid key pitfalls:

...they [the majors] do the same traditional shit and they recycle the same shit and then every now and then they might throw in an Aboriginal show or something like this and probably not even get an Aboriginal director. Well, sometimes they do but often ... for me, what appeals to me and the stuff that I like doing is smaller theatre companies, shows that are meaningful.

.... I also just love telling our stories.

These non-indigenous theatre companies, it's like, oh well, we'll do a black fella story, that'll be good. No, no, no, you have to do it for the right reason. Because if you don't do it for the right reason - it'll happen but you're going to have the biggest fuck ups along the way and them spirits and everything going to be there. ... You don't do it the right way and you have us black performers up there and the mob come and see that... We in big trouble, because we are representing our people.

In terms of the funding structures and processes for enabling appropriate processes and protocols to be enacted, it was acknowledged that for many First Nations people, the funding processes themselves can be extremely alienating and off-putting:

I consider myself to be - have fairly strong English, numeracy and literacy skills. ... I've always been fairly apt at those things and even though I find the grant writing process extremely hard. I know this is something that's been an issue for a long time but I can't imagine how your average community member could even fathom that journey if they wanted to tell their story and how many amazing and important stories do we have?

... But it's such a monumental thing. They [funding bodies] need to reach out to community more and help us, not just do grant writing workshops but actually help us to move through building our own capacity as communities. We need to be empowered to understand ... They need to make that funding more accessible in different ways, not just through a grant process. It's got to be through programs. It's got to be through professional development and not just for the people who already know how to apply to those things but for the people who have no idea how to apply for those things.

CULTURAL SAFETY AND INTEGRITY

There is a growing mindfulness across the performing arts industry of the concept of 'cultural safety' when working with Indigenous peoples and content (Australian Human Rights Commission 2011). The interviewees spoke of the importance of these and the very real implications for Indigenous performers – the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual toll of telling some stories and working in particular locations and on various country:

... another project I worked on and it was about really sensitive subjects for mob. It was based around a [location where violence was perpetrated against local Aboriginal people]. There was no protocols put in place.

We had an even team from both sides, black and white. But there was no protocols put in place for our cultural safety considering we were calling up spirits all fortnight [there]. We were asked to be playing these roles of these spirits. We were out in the elements so we were literally out on country where these things happened.

If it wasn't for the fact that we had people like [name of TO] working on the story who was able to do a smoking ceremony right there and then for us we would have been - all walked away from that with damaged spirits because we did smoke ourselves before and after each show. But we also heard that spirit we were talking about on the last night when we packed up all our gear. We heard that bird we'd been yarning about all fortnight. All of us heard it.

... I was really green as an artist in the professional world. I didn't know that it was my right to be culturally safe in that space. The people I was working with, the theatre company that put the production on, they thought they were doing the right thing by bringing two parts of the community together for this project. But they actually had no idea about those things. Just the fact that we were speaking their names and talking about them spirits all fortnight that in itself is bringing up so much energy. So I was really mindful of those things from then on.

... But I've heard yarns from other mob in the industry where they've had to play roles of being poisoned on stage every night or replaying these old traumatic stories without any cultural safety protocols in place. How do they manage that? How are they keeping their spirit well while they're playing these roles repeatedly night after night after night?

When considering touring shows, there are various considerations of aspects of safety – physical and mental health that are relevant when travelling on to different country and in to different communities. There are multiple cultural contexts to be negotiated and experiences to process that extend beyond just putting on a performance:

When return from those communities we have moments – confronted by own privilege – I was one of those kids though too and suffered severe trauma – it brings stuff up for us.

Coming off those tours you have a big come down and at times some of the experiences are very confronting. So there's a duty of care there, and also creating that feedback loop ... so we can report back on some of the issues we may have. Briefing and de-briefing and contact throughout

The importance of *cultural protocols* was reinforced throughout the interviews and discussions and for companies to look at their policies and funding, for aspects of creative process, welcomes and other 'business', and various practices to show respect for country, people and relationships:

Any time I go into a story that's the first thing I'm thinking is, which elder is coming to smoke this place out before we start working? Whether we're going to have a welcome. How are we all going to connect as a mob and take care of each other? What do we need? What's in this story? What spirits are we talking here?

.... You've got to have those protocols in place. It's just like any organisation having OH and S protocols in place. Even if that fellow has been doing that job for 40 years he still has to follow the rules. So it's the same for us.

KEY ENABLERS AND CHALLENGES FOR FIRST NATIONS PERFORMING ARTS CAREERS

In drawing together some key points about enabler and challenges for First Nations career trajectories in the performing arts, it is important to recognise the diversity of experiences and problems in generalisations. There are multiple intersections of culture, regionality, and socioeconomic backgrounds, with the impact of First Nations' heritage and history influencing lived experiences, opportunities and challenges.

Enablers that participants identified included early experiences of singing, dancing or performing and a sense of discovering their 'thing'. Access and participation in arts experiences within the community, or through youth groups and special programs play a key role for many performing artists. Various types of educational experiences were important from those in formal educational institutions such as school, being able to take drama as a subject or elective and having supportive and encouraging teachers. Participants had engaged in a range of other professional training vocational education and university courses. Some of these were courses with a specific focus on Indigenous arts and support for Indigenous students. In the professional field, networks and mentors within the Indigenous arts community were deemed as extremely important and valuable for accessing a range of opportunities. The 'blakfella grapevine' was the way many had heard about and been offered work. The existence of First Nations arts companies was deemed a key enabler, with people and processes that were supportive for telling a diverse range of stories (without them necessarily being 'white-ified'). It was acknowledged that companies that are not Indigenous per se can be supportive as well when attention is paid to processes, protocols, cultural safety and respect.

Some of the challenges which emerged included a lack of performing arts in schools and communities, or limited options for training. This includes limited exposure or opportunities for connection with First Nation performing artists and stories. Persistent impacts of colonisation and

intergenerational trauma continue to influence opportunities. It was also highlighted that the identity of First Nations performing artists can be impacted by experiences of racism and stereotypes, or being expected to bear the weight of responsibility for their culture.

The key features identified throughout this case have also been considered in relation to the concept of the 'ecology' and mapped against such. This model draws from key aspects of Bronfenbrenner's human ecology work (Bronfenbrenner 1977). The diagram in Figure 4 has the person and their identity at the core, embedded within communities. Culture surrounds and is embedded in everything and is multidimensional, but for purposes of the diagram it surrounds the individual and community. The means through which activities are enabled and enacted are the institutions and entities and that is the outer layer as depicted.

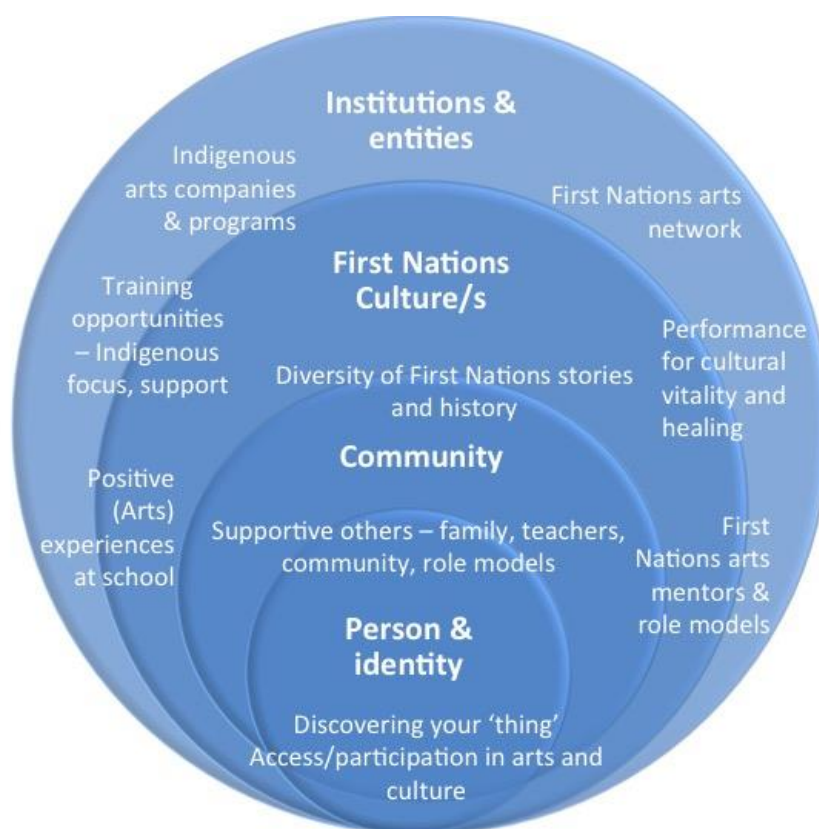


Figure 4 Enablers for First Nations performing arts career trajectories

The experiences of the artists interviewed for this case study point to the value of creating more opportunities for Indigenous young people to engage with and get involved in arts practice through local, grassroots connections. This can be complemented by exposure to a range of high quality experiences and interactions with potential First Nations role models from the arts. Multiple pathways into further learning and experiences need to be available and the support and entry into those for Indigenous youth and artists is crucial. Indigenous focused programs in the arts, as well as content and facilitators were evident in most career trajectories of the artists interviewed. For those having to leave home to access this type of education and training having supportive mentors and 'mob' to connect with was deemed very important. Beyond the training, the opportunities to work professionally are insecure, and creatives often have to move and be flexible to both find and make work. The sector is small but growing and the creatives were mostly keen to keep contributing, in many cases wanting to give back and assist the next generation of young First Nations artists

coming through. The First Nations arts ecology and network exists and is growing, and helping new artists negotiate ways in is worth further consideration. The artists interviewed all had a strong desire to see more First Nations works created and produced. They wanted to see more Indigenous producers, directors and decision makers leading these processes, and wanted to work with companies who were committed to doing it well. An example of how one company sought to do that through creating and staging a new work then becomes the focus for the following case study.

A CASE STUDY OF 'CREATING ART' - NEW WORK DEVELOPMENT FOR *BUKAL*

... I'm all about making a difference and making lives for our people and our kids better... If I can reach young people of today and tomorrow and the future (with my story and this play), I hope to inspire them to go for great heights, dream, dream, but capture those dreams and move forward with them. (*Henrietta Marrie, Traditional Owner and Storyteller*)

To investigate the process of making First Nations focussed performing arts work, this case study focusses in on the development of the new work *Bukal*. This First Nations theatre work was based on the life of Australia's first Indigenous member of the United Nations, Henrietta Fourmile Marrie. It was developed as part of JUTE Theatre Company's *Dare to Dream* program which produced new theatre works by, about and for First Nations peoples.

The creation of new performance works with a First Nations focus can encompass a number of overlapping possibilities in terms of purpose, agency, content and production:

- Work written or created by First Nations peoples
- Work about stories and experiences of First Nations peoples
- Work produced by First Nations artists and groups
- Work created 'for' First Nations peoples.

Works in these areas have been created for millennia, but in the professional theatre sector, predominantly over the past 50 years. Works created by Indigenous people for theatre began to emerge in the 70s with notable plays and works by the likes of Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis, Robert Merrit, Bob Maza, Maureen Watson, Justine Saunders and Eva Johnston (Brisbane 1996, Casey & Craigie 2011). It is acknowledged that some non-Indigenous playwrights had been writing about Indigenous stories and experiences in earlier times, including George Landen Dann (Brisbane 1996). In recent decades there has been increased problematising of non-Indigenous peoples' role in telling First Nations peoples stories, and how this can be seen as a continuation of colonial practices of cultural appropriation and dispossession. Questions about 'ownership' and who has the right to tell First Nations stories have come to the fore, with calls for Indigenous peoples to be in control of their means of representation (Enoch 1994). Beyond the writing there are other matters related to agency, safety and integrity which come to the fore throughout the creation, production, dissemination and consumption phases (UNESCO 2009).

SUPPORT FOR NEW WORK DEVELOPMENT

It is encouraging to see that there are a range of current initiatives that are focused on developing new First Nations works. Benjamin Law proposes we are in a golden age of Indigenous storytelling (2018). As well as writing and developing work for the theatre there has been an increase in Indigenous units and funds in film-making, an Indigenous woman (Sally Riley) is head of scripted production at ABC and there has been increased investment in developing professional screen writing skills as well.

Of relevance to theatre and performance development, some recent programs include:

- Balnaves Foundation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Fellowship with focus on new work development and residency at Belvoir Theatre in Sydney, (Balnaves Foundation 2018)
- Yellamundie National First Peoples Playwriting Festival (Casey 2017),

- ILBIJERRI's Blackwright initiatives, including Creators program and Master Labs (ILBIJERRI, n.d.)
- Yirra Yaakin Writer's Group
- specific First Nations initiatives with Playwriting Australia and National Play Festival.

This focus on writing and performance development has been complemented by other programs for development of new work and producer placements. For example Arts Queensland 'Backing Indigenous Arts' program include recent initiatives to support the development of Indigenous performing arts (with a focus on Far North Queensland) and as well as new work commissions, include 'Producer Placements' and 'Next Stage' (which is about building artist capacity, audience and staging new works). Some current concerns in this instance is the requirement for matched funding (or more) to be sourced for all program applications (Arts Queensland 2018).

THE BUSINESS OF ART MAKING

Theatre making and producing is not only about the art but also about the 'business'. This often involves multiple players and layers of rules, requirements and protocols. Making theatre involves negotiating dilemmas and tensions, with the challenge of finding and sustaining resources to support artistic practice while trying to remain true to artistic vision and for companies such as the one this case focuses on – social aims as well (Mullen 2017).

Decisions about funding and what is supported is often constrained by policy and economic agendas (Caust 2003) with justification often relying upon "an emphasis on numerical data – especially economic data" (Meyrick & Barnes 2017). Support for the development of new works is also impacted by recent trends of cuts in government funding which are typically in the small to medium arts sector (Eltham & Verhoeven 2018). This is the sector most likely to engage in new work development, including new work by and about First Nations peoples.

In this context, creating a new work or production can be a daunting undertaking for any creative or group, including First Nations artists or those companies who wish to produce First Nations works. To see a new work developed and mounted requires a level of support and infrastructure and professional capacity that is considerable and a professional entity or organisational umbrella is usually required. Given there are not many Indigenous performing arts companies, First Nations artists often need to work with non-Indigenous companies and producers and/or mount co-productions that can extend funding and audience base. That can be a good thing in that First Nations stories and history are Australian stories and as a nation we should be sharing these stories through various platforms and means. However, when non-Indigenous companies decide to take on this work, they need to both treat it unlike other work (considering ownership, cultural awareness, safety and agency), but also like any other work (in terms of expectations and professionalism).

FIRST NATIONS SELF DETERMINATION AND CULTURAL AGENCY

The development of new Indigenous works takes place within contested spaces, where there is ongoing debate occurring about who should lead, create, produce, promote and attend such work.

Earlier this year, Sydney Theatre Company playwright H. Lawrence Sumner – as part of a much bigger, bruising critique of the industry – accused the Australian theatre industry of "whitesplaining" and "hijacking" Indigenous stories like his. That grenade-drop led to other

Indigenous theatre practitioners openly questioning why Aboriginal stage directors aren't as common as Aboriginal stage actors and playwrights, and whether an Indigenous national theatre is needed. (Law 2018)

"In a weird way, stage kind of led the charge," Sebbens says, "but there are still white gatekeepers who get to decide what black plays are being put on." (Ross & Whitfeld, 2018)

Recent moves to recognise First Nations self-determination in the cultural arena have been specifically highlighted through the national advocacy initiatives of Arts Front (2018), with the aim to lead with 'First Nations First' and consultation around establishing a National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA). These initiatives recognise "the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts as the world's premier continuous cultural tradition. A NIACA would acknowledge and assist with the ongoing responsibilities and obligations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to maintain, control, protect and nurture this inheritance and its myriad contemporary creative expressions." (Australia Council 2018)

DECOLONISING PERFORMING MAKING AND PRACTICE

Within training programs and academic institutions, and for performance makers there have been increasing efforts to work in ways to assist with decolonisation, not only in Australia but with important work also occurring in other sites of colonisation such as New Zealand and Canada. In some ways the performing arts hold a special possibility, the ability to explore the 'what if' and training of the imagination to not only to make sense of the present, but "generate the ferment, from which knowledge that does not yet exist may emerge" (Bala 2017, p. 343), performance works can "become political tools to carve out change" (Halba 2009).

Embodied knowledge through theatre and dance can be perceived as a direct challenge to entrenched assumptions of empirical, objective knowledge (Banks 2010). "Theatre for decolonisation attends to the most basic sites of colonial violation, namely community, body and spirit" (Perry 2012, p. 116). Performance can become a decolonial act offering an opportunity to change the space and terms of conversations (Harkulich 2018, p. 47). Furthermore, the embodied nature of the performing arts "recovers stories and practices that link us to people, our own spiritualities, and to the landscapes we live and travel through." (Banks 2010, p. 11). In some ways, performing one's story can become an assertion of identity and being, that contests the legacies of trauma and experiences of erasure (Harkulich 2018, p. 47). Performance can become a site for re-imagining and rearticulating individual and group identities (Perry 2012).

While activating knowledge and action through the performing arts, it is necessary to be aware of risks and responsibilities, so that the arts might be used to shape and share the 'gifts' of individuals and communities:

This work requires a form of *attention*...we must assess *the costs, risks and benefits* as fully as we can. We need to *invent in response to our* community rather than impose a theatre process recipe. While we must be cautious, we must also *be willing to move forward*, not blindly but with ears and eyes wide open not knowing the future.... *These stories are gifts that must be handled with care in gentle yet strong containers.* (Butterwick et al 2012, p. 68)

To a significant degree the creative development of *Bukal* and the work of the touring team when working with young Indigenous people in schools is enacting a decolonising performance and pedagogy agenda. This is because the work engages in the:

“restructuring of subjects of history into agents of history” (Kohn & McBride, p. 69) whereby the colonised emerge from the fog of the colonial imaginary as liberated people. (Mackinlay & Barney 2014, p. 55)

The telling of Henrietta’s story, the story of a First Nations woman, celebrated her culture and history breaking stereotyped representations, while placing the tools and agency into the hands of First Nations artists and practitioners. While the company who produced this work was non-Indigenous, they sought to privilege First Nations voice and decision making wherever possible.

BEGINNING AND BUILDING – JUTE AND *DARE TO DREAM*

Any non-Indigenous company or entity that wishes to embark on creating new Indigenous focused work, and to do it well, needs to build relationships and trust. This recognises that trust building takes time and is an investment of belief but backed up by action. They also need to consider a range of processes and practices including cultural safety (Janke 2007), ownership and agency.

JUTE Theatre Company is one such company that has embarked on this journey, has learnt along the way, and attempted to improve its processes and approach through each project and iteration. This has been a particular focus for its work through the *Dare to Dream* project and development of new works, in particular through the creative development and staging of *Bukal*.

JUTE is skilled at searching out and gaining funding from multiple sources to support their new work development. They have partnered with other theatre companies in the past (Kooemba Jdarra, Queensland Theatre, deBase) and secured funding beyond arts-specific government funding. For *Bukal* that included philanthropic funding, sponsorship by CQUniversity (where the subject of the play, Henrietta Fourmile Marrie, was employed) as well as arts funding from state and federal agencies.

JUTE’S DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

From its very beginnings over 25 years ago, JUTE Theatre Company has focused on the development of new works, and diverse voices. JUTE is a working theatre company employing professional theatre workers, writers, performers. They support the development of young and emerging artists and only stage new works, many of which have been developed over several years and phases of creative development. For their mainhouse shows the writers and core creatives engaged are predominantly experienced professionals.

JUTE acknowledges it is not an ‘Indigenous’ company per se though has a long-standing commitment to developing new work and this has included work by First Nations people. The *Dare to Dream* program with its specific focus on development of new First Nations works, featuring Indigenous creatives and performers has been an important progression of this history.

What is important to note about JUTE’s approach, is that they have maintained a focus on investing in creative development and not rushing work to the stage. Works that are given a full staging generally have been in development for several years and gone through multiple creative developments. This demonstrates a recognition of the length of time and resources necessary to create and perform quality new work. An overview of their programs and timelines for new work creation is depicted in Figure 5.



Figure 5 JUTE theatre development programs and processes, courtesy JUTE 2018

THE GENESIS OF *BUKAL*

The roots of *Bukal* began with the recognition of a 'an amazing story', a story worth telling, and the desire from the company for it to be told well. The initiation of the project also flags the early involvement of First Nations creatives and building upon initial relationships of trust. JUTE had already produced *Proppa Solid* and JUTE's Artistic Director and CEO knew Henrietta, and so it was that in about 2014 they were both at a NAIDOC breakfast when the conversation began:

In conversation, she [Henrietta] said to me 'you know Suellen, I think I should tell my story on stage'. I went, 'well yes, you definitely should. Let's get together and talk about that'. So I do remember the first time she sat in my office and I asked her to think about what that story might look like.

... so I said to Henrietta who would you like to support you to tell this story? So we talked about different artists that we knew but Henrietta knew Rhoda Roberts and I think she and Rhoda has also spoken many years ago about the possibility of telling Aunty's story. [Rhoda was good] Because Rhoda knew Aunty's story and she knew how important it was to the world. So we approached Rhoda and Rhoda jumped at the idea. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)

Rhoda Roberts explained that she first became aware of Henrietta's story some years earlier, had been impressed by Henrietta's story and so welcomed the invitation to help shape and share with the world:

... I was working for a national television show – and Article 8 J came out, and I had no idea of the UN and all the work she was doing. But I had to do a story on Article 8J and I actually learnt about it, and I thought 'this is phenomenal', a woman from Yarrabah [that's Henrietta] is at the UN, and she spends all these years and passion developing an opportunity for First Nations people to have control over the protection of our intellectual property and biodiversity ... and you know any First Nations person today, and in the future around the world, has protection of their biodiversity. So when some pharmaceutical company wants to use our bush medicines we have a protection thanks to this very short in stature, incredible voice and amazing, incredible woman. You have given us so much and every First Nations person in the entire world is actually in safeguard because of your determination, your passion, your bravery and courage!

... And I want to thank Suellen because this type of work takes a lot of commitment it takes that commitment of finding the money, but the greatest commitment is allowing and enabling Aboriginal people to have their own voice and thank you for that because you had the trust and the faith in the story and you allowed this new voice of young Aboriginal people to tell this story of one of our 'because of her we can', Aunty Henrietta.

(*Rhoda Roberts, First Nations Creative Director, Bukal Opening Night Speech, 10 July 2018*)

Pooling what funding they could from the operational funding and other budgets JUTE funded an initial one-week creative development. The creative team who worked with Henrietta to begin with was Rhoda Roberts as creative director, Peter Matheson as dramaturg and Suellen Maunder as Artistic Director of JUTE. Peter Matheson is not Indigenous but has worked with a number of Indigenous artists in the past and is one of Australia's most experienced dramaturgs. Suellen's role

was not as a core creative on this initial team, but coming in and out throughout the week and providing another critical and creative perspective at key points.

For future creative developments and the production, the aim was to engage an Indigenous creative team in all roles (wherever possible) and to support First Nations led decision-making. This then led to First Nations creatives being engaged as the writer (with Andrea James), and as actors. JUTE also engaged an Indigenous Creative Producer towards the end of 2017, Yvette Walker, and part of her role was then to assemble the creative team and performers for the 2018 final creative development and premiere performance. Further detail of the creative development process is outlined later, but to help contextualise the case a synopsis of the play and production is first provided.

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

Bukal tells the story of Henrietta Fourmile Marrie through a series of 13 scenes which begin with her naming ceremony as a child, and growing up in Yarrabah. Heading to work in Canberra at 17, Henrietta experiences first-hand the rise of Indigenous rights and the creation of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. She discovers her passion and the cause she becomes devoted to when finding precious objects from her family locked away in museum vaults and basements. As Henrietta asks questions about who should 'own' Aboriginal people's cultural knowledge and properties she begins to shake up established museum practices and norms. Some of Henrietta's extraordinary experiences include meeting with anthropologist Norman Tindale, responsible for early versions of the Aboriginal clan map we are so familiar with and recording genealogies which include 50,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across Australia. Her drive to see the artefacts and objects of her own family repatriated home expands to her challenging International laws and policies, taking her all the way to the United Nations. This is where she is able to shape the drafting of an important article in an international convention – Article 8 J (on Traditional Knowledges, Innovations and Practices) for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

The script is presented in a highly stylised and poetic language style, working with three Henriettas who play various aspects of her persona as well as other characters who are part of the story. Throughout the play Henrietta's namesake, the *Bukal* (or lawyer cane) vine becomes a symbol for her character and journey, and this as well as her ceremony are revisited and hence ground her connection to home and country.

Throughout the play a selection of experiences from Henrietta's life are depicted, but they are not necessarily presented in the order in which they occurred. There is much that has not been included in the script including her being married and having three children! The script aims to capture the arc and driving passion of her life, her mission to gain recognition of First Nation peoples' right to ownership of their cultural knowledge and objects. The broader aim is also to provide positive stories and role models for young Indigenous people to learn from the role model of this national treasure.

CAST FOR PREMIERE PERFORMANCE 2018

The Cast

Maurial Spearim

Alexis West

Taeg Twist

Creatives and Crew

Director: Andrea James

Concept Director: Rhoda Roberts

Creative Producer: Yvette Walker

Dramaturg: Peter Matheson

Designer: Simona Cosentini

Designer: Simone Tesorieri

Lighting Designer: Jason Glenwright

Composer and Sound Designer: James Henry

Technical Advisor: Sam Gibb

Stage Manager: Ruth Maloney (P J Rosas on tour)

Cultural Consultation: Carl Fourmile

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENTS FOR *BUKAL*

Creating the script of *Bukal* involved three phases of development that occurred over a period of several years. The three creative developments went for one week each. A summary of the three creative developments is provided in Table 1 and the descriptions that follow.

Table 1 Creative development processes for *Bukal*

Phase	Focus	Who involved	How funded
Creative Development 1	Working out the story to be told	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Henrietta Marrie, storyteller and subject of the future play, Rhoda Roberts, Creative Director (and possible future director for the production) Peter Matheson, Dramaturg 	Operational funding, existing funding
Creative Development 2	Shaping the script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rhoda Roberts, Creative Director (and possible future director for the production) Andrea James, Writer Henrietta Marrie, Storyteller Peter Matheson, Dramaturg 3 First Nations Actors 	Tim Fairfax Family Foundation Operational Funding
Creative Development 3	Refining the script ready for production Mapping production and design elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Andrea James, Writer/Director Peter Matheson, Dramaturg Yvette Walker, Indigenous Creative Producer 3 First Nations Actors Designers 	Tim Fairfax Family Foundation CQUniversity (sponsor) Operational Funding

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT 1

Creative Development 1 started with Henrietta as the storyteller, telling her story to Rhoda Roberts and the dramaturg Peter Matheson. They spend an intensive week together, talking, asking questions, exploring possible storylines and threads to focus on.

Well the first time we spent about a week just finding out if there was a story and that was probably the hardest part – how do you encapsulate a real person’s life and attempt to structure it into a space that allows a storyline, that difference between literature and humanity and theatricality and that was really tricky. This was the first development (there’s been three) and there were three of us in the room... trying to get that story out. *(Peter Matheson, dramaturg, Feb 2018)*

Rhoda said she didn’t really have much to do with it, but she drilled me and drilled me at the beginning. She tried to extract every little bit of information and I’m sitting there saying ‘I’m not sure if I should tell her that’. But sitting there in front of her and Peter and them going for it, and then she brought Andrea into it and we did it again. But it’s actually very therapeutic,

having your story drawn out, and then it's there in front of you! (*Henrietta Marrie, Opening Night, 10 July 2018*)

And at the end of that first development we had all these pages with possible scenes written up, and after that it was a question of how to arrange them and rearrange them to try to find a structure and arc. (*Peter Matheson, dramaturg, Feb 2018*)



Figure 6 Sharing at conclusion of *Bukal* Creative Development 1 (Image credit: JUTE)

It is important to recognise that with the focus of the process being the development of a creative work, that that shape of the outcome was not known and the journey was uncertain:

I had no idea what I was in for. I just told it as it was, my journey and coming through all of that and then thinking how is this going to play out? They're the experts, I'll leave it up to them. It's really quite impressive to see how it's turned out. (*Henrietta Marrie, Feb 2018*)

By the end of that week, the team had identified what appeared to be the highlights and possible scenes that could be used to help turn her life story into a script. Suellen then looked to engage a suitable playwright to work on the script. She was keen to work with Andrea James, an established First Nations writer and theatre maker but at the time Andrea was already engaged on another project. Knowing that the next creative development would require more resources to do it well:

It was really hard. I kept saying to Aunty Henrietta, I just can't find the money. Because to do the next stage of creative development, it would involve actors, a playwright and a director in the room. So that becomes an expensive idea. So we struggled for a couple of years to get that money. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)

JUTE also worked on securing the funding for the *Dare to Dream* program. This program had been conceived to tour new First Nations works to regional and remote schools in Far North Queensland, including a one-week residency in each community. With JUTE deciding *Bukal* would be the second work for this program, the second creative development could then progress with that framing in mind. The delay in development meant that Andrea then became available to work on the project.

The requirement to tour the work and tour it to schools also meant some parameters were therefore determined for the shaping of the work. For example, it would include 3 actors and run at under an hour. The content had to be engaging and accessible for primary school aged children as well as for adult audiences. The staging also had to be adaptable and demountable so that it could fit in a 4WD trailer to be toured to remote communities.

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT 2

For the second creative development JUTE assembled a team of professionals in Cairns to work together for one week. What adds to the complexity and expense for JUTE is that their creative teams include creatives not only from the local region, but from across Australia. That means flights, accommodation, per diems and more:

Usually [for our productions] it's about people either having significant performance experience or training obviously. A formal theatre training program. So there's very few people [and First Nations people] with that experience here in Cairns at this point in time. ...

You know, and because we are a professional company, we need to pay artists. We need to pay them what they're worth. Often, we have a lot more costs that surround that because we're bringing people from outside because we don't have all those skills in the region. So yeah, it's expensive. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)

The point of having locally accessible training programs has been an ongoing issue for the region. James Cook University previously had performing arts courses available in Townsville and Cairns but they had been discontinued. CQUniversity has in recent years opened up a Creative Arts degree with Acting major and several Indigenous young people have enrolled. One of those, Taeg Twist, had considerable performing experience already and so the company auditioned her for *Bukal* with a view to helping cultivate the local pool of Indigenous talent in the region.

For the second creative development the team were all brought in from elsewhere, including Brisbane, Sydney (and elsewhere in NSW) and Melbourne:

So we commissioned Andrea. ... and at that stage, Rhoda was going to direct the work. At that creative development, we had Rhoda in the room with three actors – one of whom was Yvette Walker, and Maurial was with the project from the beginning. Again, Peter Matheson was on that project. So we did that creative development for a week. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)

While a lot of the initial mapping of the storyline had been done as part of Creative Development 1, when Andrea came on as the writer, she found she still need to go back to Henrietta. She needed to get to know her subject and become immersed in her story:

I came in later, the second part of it. Rhoda and Suellen had told me a bit about the story, but I could not begin to tell the story before sitting down with Henrietta on country, that was the start for me. So I came in after that first part, but we literally just sat in the rooms for days and talked. Things would come in little bits and you wait, and then I'd write a bit and then say 'how's this going, or is it back to the drawing board?' It was really a careful process of going back and forward and listening. It is an epic story and we've only really touched on

the highlights of this amazing story, there's many more we could tell. Part of the challenge was about what is going to work the best dramatically, because it is an academic world that we go into as well, so how do we make that kind of exciting. A lot of sitting, conversing, waiting for the stories, we'd get a little bit, then she'd come back two days later with Adrian and photos and recordings of talks and things like that and there'd be another piece of the puzzle. So it was about following the story and learning and waiting for the time to come. (Andrea James, playwright)

The process incorporated the ongoing interaction and involvement of the dramaturg, Peter Matheson, with Andrea talking to him every day and the shaping the story, finding the form, the language and how to work with the three actors. One of the key decisions made regarded the development of the three Henrietta characters (with the actors all playing Henrietta, as well as playing other roles):

Initially I thought we could do child, mid and the older Henrietta in terms of the journey. But then we wanted to mix it up and Pete and I had conversations about what's the most dynamic way to do it. So you get all of those different voices coming in, and rather than one person doing it you'd have aspects of herself of where she has doubt, or there's one that's taking all the risks and having a tussle with herself a bit more. It just gives a bit more spark and you can do the beautiful weaving of the three. (Andrea James, Playwright)

Throughout the week multiple scenes were drafted and the actors read them out, with regular feedback and discussion regarding the content, form, flow and impact:

So the idea of creative developments I think is really important because writers need to hear their work and see their work spatially. So – it's an intensive process, which is what we currently do, there may be other models that we trial, but we find that a week of intensive work with actors on the floor and a dramaturg and a director in the room creates a really kind of hothouse - a really hothouse process for the development of work. (Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018)

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT 3

After Creative Development 2, the writer completed a draft of the script that the key creative team were also happy with, and that was then used as the basis for moving into production planning.

At this stage JUTE made a significant appointment, engaging Yvette Walker as a full-time Indigenous Producer. This was the first time the company had engaged someone in this type of role. They had previously engaged Indigenous playwrights, directors, actors and stage managers for particular shows, but there was nobody in such a creative producer role in a continuing capacity. To begin with they didn't have any particular funding support for this appointment (though some has since been secured through Arts Queensland 'Building Indigenous Art' program):

I knew that we needed someone who was a creative producer, who had a good reputation, and so we made it happen through stretching budgets and whatever. Cadging money from wherever.



Figure 7 Creative Development 3 - Table read and end of week presentation (Image credit: Susan Davis)

Another decision made during this time was to engage a Cultural Consultant for the company and the production. While the company had engaged an Indigenous producer the Cairns region is not her country, therefore the decision was made to appoint a local Traditional Owner as a cultural consultant, this being Carl Fourmile:

[So we began working with] Yvette, you know, really looking at the cultural processes in place and then bringing on Carl Fourmile as a cultural consultant. So it's our intention for all our projects from here on, whether they're Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to have Carl [or another First Nations cultural consultant] as part of that process. So then all the work is always kind of embedded in the idea that we sit on the land of the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji people. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)

Carl's role values his cultural knowledge but his connections with the community as well:

... on *Bukal*, he was very much the cultural advisor. He taught the dances, he also provided some song for the show. He consulted with the set designers - because their [Yidinji] shields are in the show, so consulted with them on that. Basically, they sought permission at every stage of the game from Carl and if Carl wasn't able to give the permission, he sought that from elders. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)

Throughout the week Carl came in for selected sessions and worked with the actors on various aspects, including showing them a pertinent dance (the Cassowary Dance) and talking about Yidinji culture. The cast were also very excited to be able to meet and spend time with the subject of the script and the woman they would be playing – Henrietta Fourmile Marrie. They expressed their great pride in being able to tell her story, believing it is an important story for First Nations peoples, but also for other Australians as well.



Figure 8 Henrietta Marrie with the creative development cast - Maurial Spearim, Alexis West, producer Yvette Walker and Katie Leslie (Image credit: Susan Davis)

In terms of the program across the week, each day the team would work with an updated version of the script and they would do a table read. Various points would be discussed and at times explored. At the end of the day the writer and dramaturg would meet (and other creatives would be brought in at various times). Overnight Andrea would create a revised version of the script and Yvette would organize for this to be printed and ready for the cast to work with the next day.

Throughout this time there were also some media interviews and promotion of the upcoming show, with a public reading being staged on the final day of the creative development week. At this event the work was introduced and the process discussed, the actors presenting the work as a reading, with minimal stage action. A good sized audience assembled to be part of this milestone experience and the audience included many of Henrietta's family members, friends and other Indigenous people from across the community.

It's been a wonderful process, this week as part of the creative development we've probably gone through 5 drafts of the script, the latest this morning. (*Yvette Walker, Creative Producer*)

I'm really looking forward to the play when it comes out, because what I've seen now has really touched me, there are some parts where I feel the tears, it's really hit me. When we went through it again, it hit me again. And with this journey we didn't tell all of it, some of what you get is just some of my life as an Aboriginal woman and going through that journey and pathways. There were so many different pathways, then making my way to the UN, we haven't even touched on all the battles that I did, and then going to San Francisco into philanthropy and sitting at the table with millionaires (*Henrietta Marrie, Feb 2018*)

The work was very well received, with many audience members shedding tears and affirming the power and importance of the work in their unsolicited feedback:

I'm just gobsmacked, I worked in Canberra but knew nothing of this story. I'm so glad to be here tonight and hear your amazing story. I just hope that your story can get out there to more people, to capital cities, it is a fantastic story, it's so empowering, and a story that really should be told. (*Audience member, Bukal rehearsed reading, Cairns*)

After the successful conclusion of the creative development, the company ramped up operations as part of pre-production. This process was more complex than for many productions as *Bukal* would have a mainstage production in Cairns before touring remotely under extremely different conditions.

REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE

In June 2018, JUTE assembled the production team together to begin the rehearsal process for *Bukal*. The commitment from the artists ranged from 6 weeks for most of the creatives to 3 months for the actors. As well as committing to the rehearsal phase and mainstage production in Cairns, the actors would be leaving on a 10 week tour to schools across Far North Queensland straight after the Cairns show. The design team had been engaged from early 2018 but now moved into construction phase and regularly connected with the rehearsal room and creative team. Regular production meetings were also held in the lead up to technical week. An Indigenous sound designer could be engaged, but First Nations professionals could not be found for the mainstage Stage Manager, Lighting Design and Production Design roles (PJ Rosas was engaged as Stage Manager for the tour but not for the mainstage show).

At the very start of the rehearsal process, JUTE instituted an important new practice, and began the rehearsal process by taking everyone out for the first afternoon to spend time on country. This was particularly relevant for *Bukal*, as Henrietta grew up at Yarrabah community which is south-east of Cairns. The cast and crew therefore all travelled out to Yarrabah with Henrietta and Carl and visited key locations within the community. They were also welcomed onto country by other Traditional Owners and Elders and spent time yarning and learning.

So on the first day of rehearsal, you know you have four weeks of rehearsal plus a week of tech, and that's usually pretty fraught by the time you get to the technical process. So you feel like you need every second of every day. We gave up a half of that first day to actually go to Yarrabah. We closed down the office and everyone went to Yarrabah to get a sense of where this story starts. We had the great privilege of Uncle David (Mundrabay) inviting us into his home and allowing us to sit in the backyard under the Hills Hoist with his family. He kind of welcomed us to country and gave us a sense of what it is to sit and listen. So that was really amazing for the entire team. I think that our team, the non-Indigenous folk within our team, we need to do a lot more cultural training. So we really want to set that up so that we have an understanding. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)



Figure 9 Day 1 *Bukal* rehearsal - schedule meeting and flyer, then visit to Yarrabah by the entire company & Henrietta (Image credit: Susan Davis)

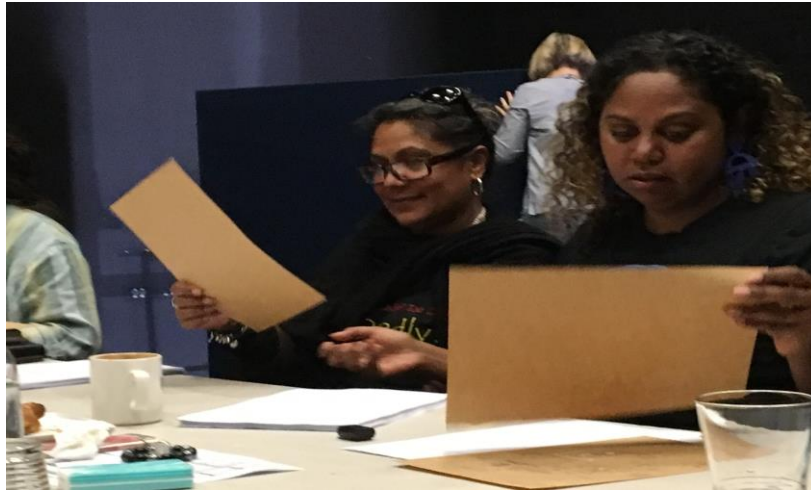


Figure 10 Cast members see the illustrations for production design (Image credit: Susan Davis)



Figure 11 Alexis West, Maurial Spearim and Taeg Twist in the premiere season of *Bukal*, July 2018 (Image credit: Paul Furse)

GAPS IN FIRST NATIONS TECHNICAL AND PRODUCTION EXPERTISE

From the beginning of the production planning for *Bukal*, there was a clear desire to engage a fully Indigenous creative team. This was to include designers, technicians and stage managers if at all possible. It emerged that this was an ‘impossible task’ even when trying to employ across the national landscape:

Yeah so I tried to get a full black team and then realised oh shit! that's going to be much harder than what I thought.

... Try and find a black lighting designer. I think there's two. One of them works full time at Bangarra. (Yvette Walker, *Indigenous Producer*)

I've heard PJ say so many times he's like one of the only black stage managers in the country. How is that possible when we've got so many talented young black fellas who would love to be doing tech stuff when they're not writing music or performing.

For *Bukal's* production, an attempt was made to establish a paid internship program to try and appoint some First Nations people with related skills to train them up into these particular roles, but JUTE was unable to secure the funding in the timeframe. There also appeared to be limited scope within current funding schemes to do this. Current initiatives tend to focus on writers or producers or new work development, and while these are all very productive initiatives they don't necessarily address these gaps in the production ecology. (e.g. the 'Building Indigenous Arts' programs in Queensland focus on developing new works or part funding towards engaging an Indigenous producer). This is an area where ongoing work is needed, beyond the scope of single companies and entities.

IMPACT AND FUTURE FOR THE WORK

The creation and production of *Bukal* has been extremely well received, with the story and its telling having a significant impact not only on audiences, but those involved in the production itself. This includes the Indigenous artists/creatives as well:

On day 1 of creative development last year I came on board as an actor, and I just bawled, I was so sad, as an Aboriginal woman I felt rocked. I looked back at my journey, I was a book-worm and a runner but I was interested in university and I wondered what if I'd known more about Aunty Henrietta and that. I mean I call her a national hero. The country doesn't know ... yet. (*Yvette Walker, Creative Producer*)

When I did my Bachelor of Arts in Aboriginal Studies and it took 10 years, I read a lot of Aunty's works and had the biggest academic crush on Aunty Henrietta. It's been incredible to meet her and listen to her and play an aspect of her. For me personally, it has meant a lot to pick up this fire. Being taken away and stolen, that's not only about artefacts but it's part of my history as well and we need to keep working on repatriation and coming back to country. I feel that through arts this fight needs to continue and it ignited that flame for me. (*Alexis West, Actor*)

I'm just in awe of Aunt and what she's done for all of us all over the country, around the world even. It's amazing, phenomenal, and releasing Tindale's genealogy, what that's done for all of us all over Australia. I'm still in awe of Aunty, I don't know what to say. I love working with her and in this team, it's an honour to get to meet her and everything. It's very rare to meet someone you play, it inspires this fire, to like 'smash the glass'. Exactly! Exactly what Aunt was saying and in any avenue, not just in acting, it's a journey, and it's just given me that fire. (*Maurial Spearim, Actor*)

It has also meant a lot for the subject of the play – for Henrietta and the ongoing concerns of her community:

I want to thank the three women, the three Bukals because they really made this play, you really brought out the emotions that were there and the feeling that I felt when trying to bring back the objects and regalia of my grandfather. (*Henrietta Marrie, Opening Night 10 July 2018*)

As well as having a premiere season in Cairns aligned to the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, *Bukal* has toured to 10 sites across Far North Queensland performing for school and community audiences in: Yarrabah, Mossman, Bloomfield, Kowanyama, Pormpuraaw, Aurukun, Weipa, Mapoon, Lockhart River and Cape York Girl's Academy.

While some people were concerned that the play might be too 'intellectual' and distant from the lives of the mainly primary school audiences who would see the show, the feedback from the diverse audiences has affirmed the importance of the story, the value of the work and its potential to educate and inspire.



Figure 12 *Bukal* on tour in North Queensland 2018 (Image credit: JUTE)

The dissemination of the work has been further extended through *Bukal* being booked to feature within the Woodford Folk Festival 2018/19. The script of the play and educational materials have also been published, with Playlab confirming this for 2019. The company is also exploring other performance and touring options for the future.

LEARNINGS FROM JUTE, *BUKAL* & THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL AGENCY

The JUTE team acknowledge that in their desire to create new works with, by and for First Nations peoples, there is still work to be done with their processes, governance and programs. However they have made some headway over the past 3-4 years and feel there are a number of actions they have undertaken that have been successful and they will continue to work on. These include:

- Deciding to produce new First Nations focused performance works
- Developing new work in partnership with the Indigenous person who offered up their story for telling
- Engaging an Indigenous producer with an ongoing position and role

- Engaging a Traditional Owner as cultural consultant
- Engaging Indigenous actors and creative team (drawing upon local and national professional talent pool while also committed to developing local talent)
- Undertaking cross-cultural awareness training for whole company
- Including an orientation to country for the whole production team and company and acknowledging the land and people who are their hosts
- Having 'proper' Welcome to Country for all shows and events
- Reviewing culture safety across production and touring programs ensuring support structures and processes are in place (especially for the touring team)
- Supporting engagement with cultural protocols and business, such as smokings where appropriate
- Advocating to establish paid Indigenous mentorship and internships (especially for technical, production and designer fields).

In terms of some final reflections and advice (in particular for other non-Indigenous companies), JUTE's Artistic Director Suellen Maunder suggests:

I think be brave is number one. Make a commitment to do it because there's a whole other audience and a whole other range of stories that people haven't heard, and so it's exciting. But, I think having known what I know now and knowing where the industry is at, I think consult with companies like ILBIJERRI, I guess potentially JUTE given that we've got some knowledge now. Just make sure that you're putting in place appropriate protocols and that the key artists are Indigenous and that they have creative control of the work. I think you know, be really prepared to learn along the way. That respect goes a long way. I'd say sit down and listen. Get yourself an Indigenous producer. Or at the very least, talk to the key creatives about what their needs are around good protocol.

... just do it. You know, you commit to it, your board commits to it, your artistic director commits to it, and you go looking for those stories and you find the way to do them'. ... you don't know what you don't know until you do it. So you know, I would just - stop saying you wish you could do it and just do it. (*Suellen Maunder, Interview July 2018*)

This advice is further affirmation of the desire by the company and First Nations artists consulted as part of this research for agency and leadership to be placed in their hands when new First Nations focused work is developed.

We would therefore propose that the notion of First Nations 'cultural agency' become part of the language of discussion for the arts and creative sector. Cultural agency affirms that Indigenous artists and creatives wish to have agency to manage, lead and control information, knowledge, representations and creative work that feature their stories. They appreciate the benefits of working with non-Indigenous people and organisations to help bring this work to fruition and share with others. Acknowledging the right to First Nations cultural and creative agency will help promote, enable and support the transformative processes that art making provides.

Related to cultural agency (Barbero et al 2006) is a cluster of concepts including cultural safety (Frankland et al, 2010, Williams 1999), cultural competence, cultural awareness and cultural security (Australian Human Rights Commission 2011, Coffin 2007, VACCA 2008) these are all important concepts that when enacted help shift policy and practices to show respect for First Nations peoples and cultures.

The opportunity with new work creation highlights the fact that First Nations cultures are alive and generative, and First Nations peoples and communities want to be active agents in the management and control of such. The concept of 'cultural agency' is that also reflects Henrietta Fourmile's call for agency in the controlling of Aboriginal and TSI cultural heritage and resources within the communities themselves:

If the revitalization and resurgence of Aboriginal culture is to fully take place, and so that we can contribute our culture to the world heritage on our own terms then we must once again be able to own, control and enjoy our cultural and historical resources (Fourmile 1989, 7).

While Henrietta in her work here was talking about physical artefacts and resources, here we are talking about the symbolic, embodied and written forms of theatre and drama, the processes that enable their creation, production and distribution.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of new performance work, creating 'experience', is human resource intensive, generally collaborative, with development and rehearsal processes that occur over extended periods of time. Unlike some visual arts practice, it is very difficult for an individual to develop a new performance work alone outside of the scope of a supportive organisation or community umbrella.

To be able to develop and share that work in a professional sphere, requires ecologies of administrative, production and technical expertise. This signals the importance of working with a supportive company or organisation, Indigenous or non-Indigenous and their provision of a 'safety-net' to support the creative process.

Non-Indigenous companies who wish to engage in this work need to invest in building relationships, trust, creative collaborations and partnerships. This may take more time than a standard grant cycle and requires ongoing commitment and reflection. Cultural agency as well as cultural safety need to be considered and accommodated. This will require attention through budgets, timelines, consultation processes, communications and ways of working.

To consider the development of new work on another plain, and considering the focus in the first section of this report on career trajectories, the development of new performance work needs to be considered within the context of the ecologies of practice that enable such to occur. Within such development experiences and 'stepping stones' need to be considered, experiences beginning with the individual, the community and culture. This includes, for example, opportunities to see First Nations performing arts works and experience them, a range of education and training opportunities both within schools and beyond, young people need to be exposed to the models and examples of what is possible that may inspire and motivate, and there needs to be a network of organisations, structures and entities that can produce and tour performance work, as well as audiences who can access the work, be engaged and commune with such.

To reach a stage where they may be able to take on a creative role and 'create art' individuals need to have the contact points, interactions and entry points to be able to engage, then develop their practice and experience. This requires opportunities at the local and community level as well as the state, national and international level. While there has been recent discussion about the establishment of a National Indigenous theatre, it is worth considering what this might deliver

across the states and regions, and the small to medium arts sector, and whether a national theatre would pull resources and focus away from the distributed network with multiple bases of activity currently in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Cairns for example.

First Nations young people need exposure to and multiple opportunities to experience performing arts practice, throughout schooling and beyond. Initiatives that recognise the growing population numbers and strength of young Indigenous artists are also worth investing in – a median age of 23 (for Indigenous Australians) as compared to 38 (for non-Indigenous Australians) – cannot be ignored. A layered network of arts entities, small, medium and large is required to be able to offer a diverse experiences and production opportunities. As part of the ecology, there need to be majors and mainstream First Nations companies, and companies that embrace commissioning and programming First Nations work as well as sustained support for small and medium sector companies engaging with First Nations work. There are gaps in areas where there are very few experienced First Nations professionals, these include producing, technical production and design. Therefore specific strategies to recruit and train professionals in these areas are worth investing in. There is also a need to support opportunities at regional, state and national levels and assistance with brokerage, navigation and mentoring.

As previously identified, the ecologies metaphor is useful for understanding the importance of networked practices and entities across education, First Nations culture and communities, government agencies, the theatre sector and beyond. However knowing that such a landscape exists only takes you so far, you need to understand how to navigate it. The wisdom of those who know country assists the novice to navigate and interpret – not only what is there now, what grows, where there is sustenance, food and water, what happens across different seasons, with fire, after rain, what has been, what might be created in the future.

The relevance to this discussion of 'Creating Art' in the Performing Arts for First Nations artists is the importance of not only nurturing different features and elements of the ecology but also the navigators and interpreters. This might translate as mentoring programs, internships and opportunities that enable First Nations artists to enter the landscape through the small to medium sector and festivals, building knowledge and experience. It might include funded internships and partnerships with the majors, with funding pools accessible for developing new work with due regard to cultural safety and agency.

The message from the JUTE Theatre Company and First Nations artists involved in the *Bukal* development and *Dare to Dream* programs was 'let's do more', and for First Nations creatives to have cultural agency in this process. There are so many great stories yet to be told and we want to be involved in telling them! Companies, festivals, government bodies, producers and funding organisations need to make a commitment and jump on board!

I think what is very clear is that we need more opportunities to tell our stories, and more platforms for locals, for our mob, for voices that aren't being heard. (With Henrietta's story and *Bukal*) just look at the level, this voice that was buried, is now up here on stage! (*Yvette Walker, Creative Producer*)

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(PJ interviewed by Yvette Walker, profile by Susan Davis, photo credit Paul Furse)

PJ Rosas is a Yidinji Mbarbrum man whose people are originally from the Atherton Rainforests. He has worked as a professional stage manager for over 20 years and has toured nationally and internationally with major companies, with theatre and also music festivals.

The profile focusses in on some of the factors that have impacted upon his career. These include early influences and inspiration, opportunities to engage with education and training, the influence of First Nations training programs and acceptance with the national 'Indigenous arts ecology'. While career trajectories in the arts are often varied and disrupted, for the Indigenous artist and creative there can be added complexities as they negotiate expectations regarding who and what they represent, responsibilities to 'mob' and working with cultural integrity. PJ's profile also highlights the gaps in the Indigenous arts ecology in respect to roles such as stage management and production, where there are still only a handful of Indigenous professionals to be found across the country.

Original inspiration and motivation

PJ discovered a love for the arts early in life, and for the Performing Arts particularly through some experiences in high school:

"I did always like the arts, I did a couple of little shows in high school and always interested me performing stuff. We did a couple of little shows, one of them was 'My boomerang won't come back' where I played the main character with three other Indigenous boys. We did that little performance, and we did a dance piece at school when I was young. We did that, and just a few of us boys knocking around music classes and just making up our own songs and dance and stuff and I guess that's where it came from really. High school... and Sunday School!"

Diverse pathways and impact of training

PJ had a range of jobs, particularly in Indigenous education and employment, working with the Abstudy program in Northern Territory and CES in Katherine and got to know many people who lived in Aboriginal communities across the territory.

His transition to a career in the arts began with studies in Melbourne in the late 1990s and an Indigenous focussed course at Swinburne University.

"The course was called 'Acting, and small businesses and community events program'."

"How I got into stage managing was that a lot of the other students wanted to be a dancer, actor or on stage. But because of my people skills, working for the government and being the oldest in the class I was like the uncle, or dad and grandfather. So being the eldest in the class I kind of fell into stage managing."

Finding this role which seemed to fit, led to his first job working on a production which had a focus on Indigenous theatre:

"My first show I worked on was called Marngrook – about the AFL football which is the Aboriginal word for AFL which is Marngrook – so we did a piece on that – about the old white guy who invented the game and how he did that. Then I was asked if I wanted to go on a tour with another show (non-Indigenous) to the UK – three-month job and that was my first overseas tour."

His training didn't end there though, and when he came back to Australia after that first international tour, PJ came back to Australia and won a scholarship for VCA to do production management.

For many Indigenous creatives specific Indigenous arts programs, pathways, and people in positions within those programs have been very important:

"... when I got back from overseas, I won a scholarship for VCA to do production management. Christian Thomas – famous artist – he was running the Indigenous section of Victorian College of the Arts, he approached me, he heard I was back in town and suggested I put it for it and I won it."

Indigenous theatre ecology and productions

After his first big break and further training PJ found himself being invited onto shows and his name and reputation spread rapidly. He was working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous creatives and involved in a range of significant productions.

"After I did the VCA course I got interviewed by one of the local magazines and I happened to come in at that time when there was a lot of collaboration, and a lot of plays being written by non-Indigenous and Aboriginal collaborators and that's how I got a lot of work - there were so many Indigenous plays coming out. As soon as I finished that one I'd go on to another one, and then another one. My name spread around and I worked for a lot of different companies over the years.

"Then the big one, there was more, but then Jane Harrison's 'Stolen' came out and that's when I worked on more Indigenous, Richard Frankland shows and 'Harry's War' and 'No way to forget', and ILBIJERRI. I scored a lot of work with ILBIJERRI for their productions."

PJ was also engaged to manage the First Nations involvement and artists on some productions where the producing company was not Indigenous specific. One of these was for the Marregeku company and Legs on the Wall. This production spanned the country with artists in Sydney and Broome. On this and other productions he has played an important role in helping the collaboration work:

"As soon as I walked in and they introduced me to all this traditional mob who were out from bush way, they up in territory and WA and those places, you could see how happy they were to see a black face."

What is involved in producing First Nations performance work?

I came in at a good time as an Indigenous stage manager, because at the time there were shows like Jane Harrison's 'Stolen' – that came out and then I worked on more Indigenous productions, Richard Frankland shows such as 'Harry's War' and 'No way to forget', and shows with ILBIJERRI. I scored a lot of work with ILBIJERRI for their productions.

"I enjoy working with our mob - there's always a lot of laughter and a lot of comedy and mob talking silly. But I like working with non-Indigenous actors and directors as well.

I think black content needs a black director, including when being produced by non-Indigenous companies. "

Responsibilities as a First Nations creative and arts worker

What PJ has often found is that whether or not he has been paid to take on a cultural liaison and consultant role, that is one he has often found himself in. Being an Indigenous arts worker often comes with additional layers of responsibility and expectations, especially working with non-Indigenous companies:

“Sometimes you become the cultural liaison person and you are working across a lot of different jobs. I can think of productions where traditional people were brought in - I was their baby sitter, their cook, I was meant to be stage manager but I ended up backstage changing their costumes and all that kind of stuff and I ended up doing a 10 minute cameo in their show! It was like they were using me for all these different areas.”

In situations where First Nations people have been away from home, or introduced to new places, situations and ways of working, PJ has often had to negotiate difficult territory in maintaining cultural safety for the Indigenous artist, as well as professional standards:

“Sometimes I’ve had traditional fellows come down to Melbourne and they’re opening the show and they’re into alcohol and other stuff and it can become an issue. I told them to go home and clean themselves up or there was no way they were going on my stage.”

“I pull them aside and have a good yarn, and then the next day or two they come back and they’re good. I talk to a lot of them outside of rehearsals and that and ask if there’s anything wrong.

As a stage manager you’re looking after everyone. There’s things you’ve got to do and abide by, and it’s like protocol for the company and for our people.”

What do I hope to see happen in the future?

PJ is keen to not only see more black shows on stage but also more black production, design and technical practitioners as well. When JUTE scouted the country to find other Indigenous technical and design professionals for their mainstage show they found another Indigenous stage manager for a mainstage production they found the field was tiny and those they could find were extremely busy. PJ would love to encourage more young Indigenous people to consider careers in these areas, particularly stage management:

“My main aim will be to find some young person out there, just to let them know that this is what you can get out of being a stage manager, or production manager in companies, the travel, you get to go everywhere. It’d be nice too, if we had a young person, an up and coming person who could work under me – we could both learn from each other. Me because of the digital age, and him or her who’s got those skills that they can pick up pretty easily. They could teach me some things too, it’d work both ways I guess.”

PJ believes there is a role to play for those companies who work in schools to help identify and mentor young people, and that professional companies could do so as well, perhaps providing a specific mentor program for young Indigenous people in areas such as stage management, production and design:

“I think we need to work on those pathways coming in like with the JUTE ‘Dare to Dream’ work - you establish that connection with kids out there in schools. Schools out on

community schools don't have a drama teacher, so us going out there is their way to say – all right this is what people do – they act, they dance, they sing – and they're seeing it live, and seeing that it's their own people, and it's not a bunch of white fellas doing stuff. Then target some of these kids, and see if you might be able to bring them down for more training. And the company can support people by providing upskilling, learning more about theatre and how a production is put together.”

His final statement about his career and the power of creating live performance art?

“I love live theatre, I love the action of live theatre, the performance of live theatre, I love the lighting, the sound, the set so that for me, that gave me the biggest thrill... seeing these things develop and seeing a production being developed through rehearsals, work in progress stuff, and seeing it come alive, and all of a sudden there's the performance. That's my biggest thrill, looking and seeing stuff that I've worked on and been performed in live theatre... The biggest thing I take away from it is the happiness, the enjoyment of doing theatre. Live theatre is magic.”