

APAM–WIRE #6 | Summary Notes
[Programming Performance, Post-Pandemic](#)
Wednesday 20 May 2020 2pm AEDT

Speakers:

YT: Yvonne Tham ([Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay](#))

WE: Wesley Enoch ([Sydney Festival](#))

KE: Kristy Edmunds ([UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance](#))

Panel Host:

ZS: Zohar Spatz ([La Boite Theatre Company](#))

APAM Host:

NV: Naomi Velaphi

Welcome & Acknowledgment of Country

NV: Good afternoon everyone, thank you for joining us today for APAM Wire #6. I'm Naomi the Program Producer here at APAM.

The APAM Wire series provides a range of perspectives from the international market alongside discussions of creative practice and in-market experience.

To begin I would like to acknowledge the custodians of land on which I live and work the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations. I'd also like to acknowledge the traditional lands this digital platform reaches and extend this acknowledgment to First Nations people with us today and elders past, present and emerging.

Today we have a group of wonderful guests you will meet shortly who will be chatting about what happens when the doors to venues eventually re-open. We don't know when that will be but presenters are thinking about what and how to program when eventually COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and people can return to arts venues and festivals.

Introductions

ZS: I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that I work, live and raise my own family, the land of the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples. I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which I was born and raised, the country my family travelled to as survivors, refugees and settlers. I acknowledge all Elders past, present and all that are with us this afternoon. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

For those of you I have not met, my name is Zohar Spatz, Executive Director of La Boite, Australia's longest continuously running Theatre Company – we turn 95 this year. And while our age and survival is a huge achievement, how we thrive into the future is deeply interlinked in how we ensure we are relevant, we develop daring and passionate artists and share stories that don't just entertain but move and empower our audiences.

Today's conversation is deliberately focusing on the process of programming and presenting work has been impacted and will continue to change, following COVID-19 restrictions. There will be a separate session soon unpacking how artists are re-thinking and evolving their practice, as similarly to presenters their perspective is worthy of a session in itself.

Before we kick off I would like to do short introductions to each of the panellists.

KRISTY EDMUNDS is an artist, curator and currently the Executive Director and Artistic Director of UCLA's Centre for the Art of Performance (CAP UCLA), a leading presenter of contemporary performance on the West Coast in the USA. And for those lucky enough to have been in Melbourne at that time, Artistic Director of Melbourne International Arts

Festival where your legacy on not only the city but also some of us lucky to work on the event lives on in how we approach artists and audiences.

WESLEY ENOCH is a writer and director and the current Artistic Director at Sydney Festival. Previously Wesley has been Artistic Director at Queensland Theatre Company; and at Ilbjerri Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative. Wesley is a deeply respected and generous arts leader, leading with heart and connectivity.

YVONNE THAM is the Chief Executive Officer of The Esplanade Co Ltd in Singapore, where she is responsible for the overall management and programming direction of Esplanade. As well as a leading international arts centre, The Esplanade aims to be inclusive, fostering empathy and bringing about a greater understanding of different cultures and communities, which we need more than ever.

Before we begin unpacking some questions I'd like to ask each of the panellists to give a short update on how you as people, leaders and of course your organisations are navigating COVID-19 some of the impact and actions you have been taking.

KE: I acknowledge the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (the Los Angeles basin and South Channel Islands). As a land grant institution, we pay our respects to the Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders) and 'Eyoohiinkem' (our relatives/relations) past, present and emerging.

Great to be part of this conversation. CAP UCLA is an equivalency of a major festival in how it programs, and that program goes from September to May each year. In terms of COVID-19, thousands of artists are impacted, tens of thousands of audiences affected. KE's family are all fine. She has a surreal feeling that we're in a 'Tuesday' that is lasting forever. She asked: how do we pivot with integrity and around the artists, whom are our continuity for our work. We're creating a new terrain. In the US there's some public assistance but not on the scale in other countries. There's been an enormous amount of philanthropic support in the US. ArtistRelief.Org have been doing incredible work. It's with a huge heart that KE is part of this discussion as an 'honorary cousin'.

WE: is a proud Quandamooka and Noonukal Nuugi man, tuning in from the Gadigal lands of the Eora Nation.

The Australian Prime Minister recently referred to the impact of the virus on white Australians over 70, and Aboriginals over 50. It brings forward the inequality built into our society. Access to internet being just one. A lot of the elders in my family are locked down on Stradbroke Island. Our Elders are our library. We have to make sure we look after them. This notion of looking after Elders has been absolutely to the fore. We cannot afford to lose people.

The [Australia Council for the Arts First Nations Roundtable](#) is a key mechanism for access and support for First Nations artists.

Sydney Festival early on took the decision to make its 2021 edition Australian work only. We need to look after the artists. This is an opportunity, not just from a cultural point of view, but an environmental and economic point of view as well, for our artists to have a platform to speak to the nation. Sydney Festival falls in January. WE referenced January 2020 and it being a time of epic bushfires during the festival. He spoke of how the birds are taking over the city again and mentioned that the ibis 'the bin chicken' is his new totem.

YT: What's going on in Singapore: it's a tinier country than Australia and has a very centralised government, and therefore centralised response in responding to COVID-19. The crisis has thrown up the inequalities between rich and poor. Top of mind for people here is that most of the virus cases are in migrant workers. FYI, there are ~500,000 lower wage migrant workers in Singapore, part of ~5 million total population. At Esplanade, we need to be the venue for everyone. We usually have free performances every day at Esplanade. So much planning went into 2020 and now we have to put that behind us...

last year (2019) Esplanade launched a new digital platform, which was in development for 2–3 years before that. “If everyone is spending all this time on their devices, how do we bridge physical and digital gathering spaces?” How much work can Esplanade do on this platform? We will keep experimenting and developing the platform, called Off-Stage.

The conversation turned to prepared questions which ZS directed to the panellists. Their responses are recorded below.

Wesley: *You are the artistic director of an arts festival which is continuing working towards presenting a major event in January 2021 with a program featuring exclusively Australian work. Can you talk us through the vision behind the program and the process you have, and the team have had to engage to build it during this period of uncertainty?*

WE: Responding to YT’s point that society has atomised, “we are all together in a collective vision.” Combining to address an issue together. We have to keep thinking this way, that’s the way we’ll get through it. We don’t know when things will recommence, and fluctuations in currency also a key factor. It was a philosophical decision: “we need to hear our voices a little more.” People have embraced the all-Australian festival.

I’ve been very keen to hear more from *our* artists. There are broadly three types of programming streams for 2021. The stranded asset – a whole bunch of shows that do not have a forum to be expressed, and SF can provide a place so they aren’t stranded (creative developments too). There are voices about our time now... we want to privilege lots of new work.

Ongoing relationships are creating work. We will not be in a totally responsive mode. We have to put our values to the front. We believe in Australian voices; we believe in diverse voices within that context; FN artists, artists from different cultural backgrounds. We can’t be absolutely responsive. Living by the festival’s values mean we’ll be able to reflect much that is affecting the human spirit.

We’ll have to be responsive in August / September when we lock down the program; what will be allowed and what it will be.

I’m in two minds about the digital. I’ve been thinking about January – will we want to embrace the community again? Almost a third of our program will be outdoor activities to bring people back into our city scape. Whatever eventuates it has to be in a safe way.

Can I engage in my community in a safe way? Can I race up and rub myself up against art and all that is on offer?

ZS referenced the [Patternmakers survey first set of results recently out](#) : 9/10 audience members are keen to come back, and want the live experience and to be in a community.

WE stated that this survey is about existing audiences. I am also very interested in the new audiences that aren’t coming. How can we look at public good in other ways? How can we re-create it? Reaching out to people who don’t normally come...

Kristy: *At the time pandemic restrictions were put in place, programmers of arts venues and festivals were negotiating presentations which have had to be deferred, suspended or cancelled. Commonly, artists do not get paid until the work has been presented. In what circumstances is it necessary to start over from scratch? What’s the balance in your mind?*

We can’t start from scratch. We’re in a continuum. A contract is the result of a promise. The presenting world tends to create a contract structure whereupon an artist is paid upon completion of a project. Some venues are hiding under the legal cover / constrains of Force Majeure clauses in presentation contracts, but this can be to the direct catastrophe of independent artists and makers and companies.

How can we talk together about honouring the agreement / promise we made. To look at rescheduling and in what way? Timing is key. Especially in a suspended space.

It doesn't matter how extraordinary our institutions are, the key is moving resources as quickly as possible to ensure there's an ability to support independent artists, so they don't fall off a cliff edge. It's literally about the human duty to fulfil a promise. Commit in every way possible with our resources.

Let's put payment in front of artists as we reschedule; on the scale of a promise made, how might we reschedule?

In theatre, things change but a lot has universality so how can we collaborate to make meaning? How can we collaborate with our film colleagues to document work in this time? How do we work with their creative capacities that can create mobility?

In the US you have 36 million people who are now unemployed. From 50 year old First Nations age vs 70 year old white people – it's the same here with Indigenous communities, minorities, the list goes on. How do we have this continuity and work to gather for an ecological imperative around what culture means and sustain it?

At CAP, we have to act with integrity, for everyone; artists and audiences and team.

How do we care for our communities? How are we ensuring continuity of care and of access and how to we move rapidly together, not for what it means for an institution's brand or financial stability means, but what is right in terms of how we ensure continuity of care.

ZS: this sentiment is integral to re-opening, that artists and audiences feel safe returning.

YT: There is so much distrust of institutions in recent times. I agree with Kristy. We must honour contracts. Cultural institutions have a responsibility to the communities (plural) that we serve.

In Singapore we're breaking Ramadan this weekend, and usually have a big celebration. We've always had a brilliant festival, it's a wonderful celebration of food, music and culture. We were planning for a scaled down version in June, as artists and the Esplanade said we have to do something and celebrate. How can we as artists and arts workers, not let art be lost as part of that celebration, and how can it be meaningful? Digital has a role to play.

We have to say, that digital companion is going to stay, like it or not. How do we make that meaningful? And generate income?

Around the world, people are streaming and broadcasting from archives for free – but that's not sustainable. This weekend we at Esplanade will begin to monetise digital platforms – artists have been giving you a gift and now it is the time for audiences to give back to the artists (note: Esplanade is not taking any cent – all goes to artists). This is an experiment, how can we assist in deriving another income source (for artists as much as the institution)? We're starting something new, ticketing it, \$0, \$5, \$10 etc. Arts as a form of a gift – the arts give you something, what will you give back? Even in digital form, it's an exchange.

ZS: liked how YT said: How do we ensure the art isn't absent? Art is saving us at the moment in this crisis – it is fundamentally important. Yvonne, you mention work coming out of the archive.

Moving forward, what programs you are experimenting with to enable Artists to develop new works as a response to their and their community experience of COVID-19?

YT: In some ways we've very much depended on Esplanade as a physical space, whose works we have already planned, etc. Though we are having more conversations with artists and audiences, who may not want to step into a physical space... there was a play recently completely converted to audio for online distribution. It's interesting to see how far we can go; do we have artists make podcasts?

We work with music and dementia community, or youth in vulnerable positions, that's also been interesting. The elderly are so lonely at this stage. We want to use this opportunity to recruit more artists with interest in this area to help us.

We are taking this chance to build capability in this space. How can we use this time (and use the pressure to not present or make work) to upskill in new areas of development?

Many artists are now preparing webinars or toolkits. Or folks in film. We're trying to start by providing courses. How do you design performances for recording? Those are skills we haven't thought about because it's always been archival. It's a time to thoughtfully develop new skills.

ZS agree, it's an incredibly busy time with upskilling and experimentation.

How are you as arts presenters approaching the question of what audiences will want to see when it's safe for venues to open their doors? What's the mix of intuition, pragmatism and zeitgeist that guides your choices as artistic leaders and curators?

KE: It is zeitgeist. I've had many conversations with supporters, patrons, colleague institutions, the lot. It's a hangover of the 20th century: being pressurised into, the reinforcement of a brand identity and the mindset that without growth you will die, and so on – that's gone flying out the window.

How do we move forward freed from the pressure of growth? We *can* get off the 'gerbil wheel' and we can stop competing with our ecological infrastructure. How might we collaborate more earnestly and forthrightly to support the preservation of culture and the innovation of culture? Enter not to get crushed, but to create continuity.

We are points of an international infrastructure that has to live lighter on our land and share our resources and infrastructure. Also, deeply connect and share our content: "We can share this content." The artist resources are held up, especially as we work online. And we haven't heeded the warnings... We've seen that with climate change warnings but haven't adapted.

How best to proceed and create meaning? In what way? And what is my expressive truth to try?

If we collaborate together, we create scale, with the integrity of practitioners. Doing it together is a leadership enterprise of those working in the performing arts. As hard as it is, and as devastating it is to lose our elders and leaders, it's about acquiring wisdom rapidly to offer something that will pull us off a gerbil wheel none of us wanted to begin with.

WE: The notion of the great upskilling that's occurring the past couple of months. People have found themselves valuing the expert. The collaborative online community is amazing to observe. Old aunties in communities are using Zoom. We are analogue as human beings and we should hold this experience dear, but we must also privilege the idea that our community is being inviting to participate online, and they are there. Should we start talking to our audiences more of what they're wanting? Upskill our understanding of what we're doing.

As artists we are storytellers to our tribe. "I am in service to the tribe." He speaks of the need to identify the tribe and with this there is an opportunity to shift and change the relationship we have with audiences.

The systems in Australia have identified the tribe as “user pays” – who will buy a ticket? Rather than a group of people that you belong to. So that’s a shift I think the Festival can do more of. And every artist should be in an osmosis connection with community. If you’re not connecting to a community, as an artist, where are you finding the source of your work?

In moments of stress, you can pivot to the ‘everything is possible’ mindset OR there will be a conservative power that says ‘go back to what we used to do’. We have to fight that within ourselves as programmers. You can’t just go back to the hits of 1990s! That’s not gonna work!

We need to find the enjoyment in the unknown again. Kristy said this before about young people – if we pivot to the conservative, and have ten years of ‘paying off the debt’, we lose a generation of artists, we also lose a generation of audience. We must as artists we must avoid feeling the fear and have courage. Stay brave and take risks.

ZS: It’s so wonderful to hear presenters say they don’t want to go back to the ‘old normal’, that you’re asking artists to be brave.

Yvonne – you mentioned the Esplanade is a place for everyone, and how you’re moved forward for everyone. And picturing that there’s something for everyone, is there something uncharted coming up? Are you looking forward to that?

YT: If it’s uncharted I wouldn’t know yet! The work is done by a large team and it’s that diversity that they have (diversity of programmers and conversations across many people). What will eventuate in the next 6–12 months, in terms of international work, and without certainty, that is the question... What is the meaning of international collaboration? With COVID we are so aware of how interconnected we are globally.

I don’t have an answer yet – those international communities are looking at 2021+. The digital is going to stay, as a companion to everything. What are the new models of international engagement?

Deepening engagement with works; before and after, and in a social media space how might you engage with another audience member you don’t know. The physical and the digital space can help us with this work.

Within a theatre it is still sacred but what other platforms can we create for a work to have impact – different ways to engage with work. Programming team, marketing team and indeed whole organisational team is charged with this discovery. Community is so important (250–260 staff members at Esplanade) but yesterday colleagues in stage rigging were teaching the entire team how to tie knots. We’re starting to learn about other parts of the organisation, in a deeper way, in a way that otherwise we wouldn’t have due to COVID–19. We are suddenly more open and more transparent. I hope we don’t lose this freedom...

KE: echoing thinking about the back of house team “it’s our job not to lose that quality... We are in this with everyone”. Part of all of this is expanding awareness of all the different elements of sector (and what we do). The technical and production teams, we need to reveal them all. Our fourth wall has been breached, we can’t act our way through this shit. We’ve got to all find our different pivot points and not retreat to silos of the past. I don’t think we want to go back to the past? Apart from the Greek term that theatre is a seeing place, and we’ve been pushed off course with spectacle and growth. That’s where the gift of COVID–19 is, however traumatic. We must return to a seeing place.

We’ve taught audiences they can have the greatest show on earth for their \$50 ticket. We now have the chance to change that. We all become philanthropy and we all become the song line points of continuity. My staff are involved in that. I have pushed into salary sacrifice so we can preserve the jagged edge from reducing the knowledge base of a level of expertise which is in suspended animation right now.

There's a space for artists to have online residencies. There are some extraordinary virtual theatre spaces for a community. But we must also be investing in our creative producers and artists as content creators. How do we work with the technological fields? So let's make useful tools for all of us. We have the chance to accelerate the recovery. Celebrate the maverick in all of us.

Wesley & Yvonne: looking into a crystal ball, 18 months from now: international travel is possible once again, but flights are less frequent and more expensive. What about international collaboration, Australian and international artists, how do we move forward into the future?

WE: The way we used to travel, it'll take a long time before that switches back on again. What is a new version and what might it look like? The idea of long-term relationships. Can we use these new platforms beyond the crisis, and beyond artistic collaboration? Especially if otherwise people might be at odds with each other.

Collaborators are those who are intellectually and physically beside you. Instead, what about someone distant who is intellectually beside me?

This notion in the future that everyone will be an individual together. Identities will be less about conformity and more about expressing yourself. Collaborations won't be just about time and space, they'll be about who am I speaking to?

Everyone will be an individual together. Collectivism. There will be identities less about how you express yourself, what am I coming together for?

Sydney Festival 2021 will be my last Festival – I want to get back into making art, that deeper conversation. The collaboration is what he most wants to do and in particular with people on his land. I feel incredibly enriched by conversations with those near us, and understanding who we are. To stop thinking about ourselves as a young county (and that we are somehow lesser than) and challenge that paradigm. We are ancient and we inherit a 100,000-year long history.

How do we speak in collaboration with others, not as a junior partner but as one with amazing things to share? A collaboration with country. All without feeling too nationalistic.

KE: I was an immigrant artistic director of the Melbourne Festival for four years. And the staggering multicultural, cosmopolitan culture of a country, was something I really wanted to celebrate.

ZS: One last question. In light of the pandemic and the opportunity it's afforded for reflection, our sector wasn't already solid. Within calls for a reset, what would be your reset?

WE: Universal basic income. Let's provide food and shelter for everyone and let's watch the creativity and artistry come out of that. Turning organisations inside out. How can organisations be more outward and be more porous in their structures versus closing down and protecting? The best art happens when you see things go in and out. Facing accountability.

YT: Because we're so diverse and work with so many communities, the biggest reset comes from listening to our audiences... we're used to listening to artists and our community. How do we build more intimate relationships with audiences and small groups of audiences? Audiences in creation and not just in 'receiving' the work. Resetting the idea of audience engagement. What is the agency of the audience?

ZS: Bringing artists and audiences together on a journey.

KE: The sustainability is the conversation with the audiences. Our job is to stretch the soul of culture. It's not just making familiarity. The future will be unevenly distributed. We need to be honest in the situation not focusing on brand but on vulnerability and transparency.

Our job is also to stretch. The conversations with audiences is intimate and happens continually. Digitally and in the live space, audiences are going to find a way care (and we are not the only thing they are doing – there's restaurants and other interests and pursuits). Continuity won't fall much until there's a vaccine. How do we help the scientific community? How might independent artists help with contact tracing? How do we show ally-ship with other sectors and businesses? We've got to recognise that the scale of intimacies. Who wants to be standing there with the repetition of the past?

NV, Question from a listener: what is your advice for sharing transparency and the level of crisis that some institutions are in at the moment?

WE: Do it, out loud. We've learnt that any sign of weakness will be seized upon and attacked. We'll usually talk to government and philanthropic behind closed doors. We need to be honest with our community. We must say what we want. We need to make sure we are part of telling the story.

LPA (Live Performance Australia), as a peak body, will put out a statement, in the same vein as aviation and sport, about how we want to own our future. We can't only be in responsive. We can look at checkerboarding [audience placement in theatres/venues] but we potentially rob the people of the experience.

KE: We are all extremely vulnerable and we are all possibly more transparent. We're sounding like we are super together. Yet we are stressed we are imperilled, we are all weakened. Pivot to larger organisations being honest about their situation, but here's where we don't know either... we have cloud cover at the moment. We are inter-dependent and we can come together in a deeper cultural conversation. Larger institutions must be open and transparent. Be true together. It will make a difference.

NV, Question from listener: How do we build new collaborative development and presentation models between presenters when we operate in an environment and funding context which forces us to compete with each other for funding, audiences and exclusivity?

YT: I don't think we'll ever get to this dream state where there's no competition. Resources are limited. It's not the only way of functioning. Speaking from the position of a large organisation, the steadiness is key; in Singapore and the Esplanade has solid government support. We exist only because of the artists. We are nothing without the community and the artists we serve. We are only here to serve... Aware that Singapore is different. We are a state arts centre.

The level of competition is globalised especially for Singaporean artists. International artists will not be able to come to Singapore for some time, so this might privilege Singaporean artists.

KE: artists responding to resources that are available, it does have to be said out loud. They're forming collaborative streaming services so they can be in it as peer support. You are looking after each other; interdependent voice have more power together.

The more we can unite than who got what grant when? Unite, galvanise, share and move, move quickly and don't be afraid to fail.

NV: thanked panellists. It's been a great conversation. Super encouraging, and enlightening. And hopeful for recovery.

We will be having a Wire conversation coming up which focuses on performance practice. Thank you everyone. Take care out there.