

APAM–WIRE #7 | Summary Notes
Performance Practice, Post Pandemic
Thursday 18 June 2020 17:00 AEST

Speakers:

BG: Bruce Gladwin

DK: Daniel Kok

ST: Selina Thompson

SW: Sarah Ward

Panel Host:

AWJ: Angharad Wynne–Jones

APAM Host:

NV: Naomi Velaphi

Welcome & Acknowledgment of Country

NV: Good afternoon everyone, thank you for joining us today for APAM Wire #7. 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.

Today we have a group of wonderful guests you will meet shortly who will be chatting about performance practice post-pandemic. Housekeeping: 90 mins, and questions along the way please use the Q&A function.
Over to Angharad.

Introductions

AWJ: Hello I'm Angharad Wynne–Jones, and It's a pleasure to be here with you all.

I live and work on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations and pay respects to the elders and to emerging leaders. Throughout this crisis and indeed at all times, as I have felt scared, depleted or confused, the strength and clarity of the voices and practices of First Nations leaders, steeped in truth, power and wisdom, have calmed, cajoled and encouraged me. Thank you.

I feel like I know many of the people attending as friends and colleagues but for those I don't know I'm a white cis gendered woman whose first language is English – so a beneficiary of and complicit in the broken capitalist project. I'm also a lesbian, Welsh, in my late 50's, proud mother of a trans daughter, and an arts worker – so some marginality is familiar.

I have short grey hair with pre COVID highlights and blue eyes and I'm wearing a grey t-shirt and a green cardigan. I currently work (and I am extremely grateful to have a job) as Head of Creative Engagement at Arts Centre Melbourne.

Today we are going to talk about artistic practice and of course the context that we make and share it in.

The pandemic has laid bare the deep fault lines in our societies and communities, and where and how individual and collective responsibility is expressed and perceived. As we know the pandemic has starkly revealed racism in social structures around the world,

resulting in national and global protest movements, and the imperative for systemic change. It has also literally given some of us and our planet a chance to slow down, to rest, to breathe clean air and for some parts of our ecology to recover.

A provocation for today's conversation is this...

How will we as artists build on these systemic changes?

How can we contribute to the end of white supremacy, support climate justice and truly be inclusive?

That's a number of huge and potentially daunting and thrilling questions but luckily we have a panel of truly extraordinary artists from around the world who are more than up to the task of wrestling them and many other issues to the ground.

Sarah Ward (SW) is an Australian cabaret artist, actor, writer, teacher and producer. She is Creator of beloved cabaret character Yana Alana and Queen Kong.

Daniel Kok (DK) is a dancer/performer/curator and artistic director of company dance Nucleus in Singapore.

Bruce Gladwin (BG) is an Australian artist and performance maker. He has been the Artistic Director of Back to Back Theatre since 1999.

Selina Thompson (ST) is UK-based artist and writer.

SW: Hi! I live in Footscray, ten mins walk from the Maribyrnong River. I acknowledge the elders who are here and yet to come. I create larger than life queer cabaret characters. Work that focuses on mental health and community.

DK: Hi, I'm an independent artist mainly working in performance. Calling from Singapore. Artistic Director of a small, artist and creative development space Dance Nucleus, funded by National Arts Council. Much of my work has been cancelled or postponed and therefore I've re-directed a lot of my attention to work at Dance Nucleus, to help artists in Singapore and in the region. I am excited to be tangibly involved in working differently.

ST: Good morning! I am a dark skinned, black woman. 30 years old. Calling from England in the UK. It's 8am. My practice is primarily writing for performance and writing for installation. My work has focused on what it is to be a black person living and working in Britain.

BG: I recently turned 55, have grey hair and 6ft 4.5 inches tall. I work as Artistic Director at Back to Back Theatre (B2B) in Geelong, a regional centre south of Melbourne. I pay my respects to the Wathaurong people down there. B2B is an ensemble-based company and we make idiosyncratic work that comes from the hearts and minds of those performers, and is reflective of larger contemporary and societal issues. We are all part of this ecology thrown up in the air in this present situation.

AWJ: To begin the conversation, a question about creative process or a project that you've experienced that has been created in response to this time, the COVID-19 pandemic. Why do you find it interesting and exciting?

SW: I've been asked a lot to do live streaming performance, but have found myself feeling sad after these performances. I was asked by the Adelaide Cabaret Festival to create a new work, inspired by line: "what good is sitting alone in your room?" I made 3 x 1-minute pieces. Instead of trying to make a previous work fit into a digital context. It was a fulfilling project and plus I was paid to sit at home and make a work in immediate response to what I was experiencing as a person. Making what is personal, universal (this is a common strand of my work). One piece is just my naked bum on a stool, rotating, pretending I'm talking on Zoom, but dropping the camera. With an interesting light. One question I'm asking: Why isn't art being talked about on the radio? Sport is being talked

about, the impacts on hospitality and tourism sectors, but why not the arts? It's like art doesn't exist and looking at how that feels.

BG: With what we, Back to Back Theatre, are dealing with as company, I've been so impressed with our artists and their response to the changes of lockdown. We've been running an artist in residency at a school in Geelong, working with kids of mixed abilities. It has shifted from being a performance outcome in our studio, to a set of animations. It was quite a change – working with the kids in their homes remotely. Hats off to the creatives driving that project.

In terms of what I've come across, a work called [Cooped](#) by Jamar Roberts, a dance work inspired by the release of statistics about black and brown bodies being affected by COVID-19. It's a fever dream, playing on the idea of sickness in quarantine and historical trauma, their relationship to confined spaces. Why it resonates is it's both beautiful and seductive, but also the trauma present in the work. It feels like it's speaking to multiple contemporary issues and historical at the same time. Also, the performer is the choreographer is the director – he is shaping it at all angles.

On other work, one of our ensemble members Sarah Mainwaring presented a work in our studio the other day – a kind of multi-camera dance on film work that's super low budget. It reminds me of a Zidane video, the soccer player, being shot with 17 cameras, yet this is one camera. The opportunity for her to set up all the multiple angles, and then insert herself into the frame, capturing this performance. It felt like new territory. I'm excited by potential for that work.

ST: I really struggled with this question because I have found interacting with art and performance in this time very difficult. I have found it possible to be productive but not necessarily creative. As a creator, I have been involved in a conference hosted by Heart of Glass: [With For About](#). It's a slow-moving conference for a fast-evolving crisis: four afternoons of 2.5 hr sessions. I was struck by the kindness in my contract. I would still get my fee if I got ill or had to care for someone. The curators check in with me before and after. It had great 'safe space' policies, and contributors from all over the world: artists in Uganda figuring out how to make bleach and hand sanitiser. Artists made an incredible film work from their kitchen, taking ingredients from the kitchen. I made a load of films about my cat. There were films about people involved in the Irish Housing Movement, women's rights. It felt genuinely intergenerational, looking at change from many angles. They had to postpone it by a week, they just weren't ready at first. People were working slower than usual. What I keep coming back to is, how we are working with artists as whole people. Because it's a wild time. I found the working methods deeply inspiring and feeling like at every session I didn't know who to expect. It was brilliant.

DK: I really identify with the question of being productive verses being creative. Very early on, before we went into lockdown in Singapore, as many activities were being cancelled or postponed, we sat down as a team at Dance Nucleus and we talked about how we could use this opportunity to use freed-up resources. There were six new initiatives. One worth mentioning, I was seeing whatever support given to artists in Singapore was about keeping people making, producing, presenting, albeit online. I wanted to make a case for how creating isn't the same as producing. I see the act of creating as being essentially solitary. And knowing how artists will be pulling back and thinking over the next three months, I believe there isn't a better time to support artists to create. We did a series of micro-residencies, providing a mini-stipend of \$2,000 for 15 independent artists, to help them create from home – "artists in residence!". We asked everyone to look at how documentation plays a part in their creative process – what we came to call work-books that we are now looking to publish. To depict the idea that independent performance practice isn't necessarily about presenting or producing shows. Theatres may not be open, but we can look at existing alternatives.

The words care and reflection keep coming up, and the opportunity to pause and reflect. I also wanted to give myself the opportunity to unplug. Otherwise I'd be looking at my laptop or my phone the whole time. I went back to my practice, to working with rope. If I can't work in bondage, I got friends to commission bespoke pot plant holders (via

Facebook). And used the money garnered from this to support artists in countries in regions where they do not have government support; Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil, Chile, Poland and Berlin. I like how I could maintain some personal conversations and connections with colleagues across the world in this way.

AWJ: How have you found collaborating with other artists during this time? How can we create new relationships in this time?

SW: I've been collaborating with my partner Bec. A few years ago I went to Edinburgh and I had the goal of being an 'export'. I realised it would be too much work, I thought it's gonna be hard, and it's a twisted idea of what success is. What makes me happy is not just performing, but also teaching and community engagement. It makes me so happy, creating workshops and working with schools. So my work didn't stop with the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, I didn't pause, didn't have a moment to reflect, actually more things can through for me. It was exciting but scary time. I live with anxiety, on meds. I'm excited with the connection with the local community. I do think there is this set idea, especially for performing artists and to be successful you have to be touring, updating Instagram, getting followers – but that's exhausting. Not all of us want to do that! I find it so wholesome for people to get in touch with their local councils – they have programs to engage with the community. Look at local schools – I'm at Footscray Primary School at the moment. I'm bringing together people over 60 and kids under 10. As artists, we can be making our connections, and meaningful connections, with communities. And often local. The pandemic has brought this out.

AWJ: Bruce, how has the Back to Back Theatre ensemble maintained a sense of group practice while not being able to meet physically?

BG: Around productivity, our cycle of making work is usually across three years. I like the idea of leaving a field fallow in the off years. We're fortunate: an asset of the company is time, and personnel. We're making sure the personnel are all right – connection is the difficult thing. A number of our performers don't have access to computers and don't have the skill-base to get on the internet and get on Zoom. But with some support, and sending an iPad around where needed, we've managed to get everyone online.

We work with another ensemble – Theatre of Speed – and seeing them all come online was pure joy. The technology really suits some people. Some people feel much more empowered in this frame. Personally I feel hungry to be in the room with someone else working. All of the ensemble members are working on an individual projects – they are the director, the writer, the performer, and they can bring on their own creatives. Scott [Price] is making a one-man version of Live Aid. It's called 'Sound Aid', and it's a fundraiser to save Australian rock and roll. Simon is making a work about his obsession with Britney Spears. The ensemble is drawing on the influences around them. We're still bringing in guest artists and I've seen some interesting experiments in choreography. We're taking the medium as far as we can push it and test it. And this is the creative medium we have to work with at the moment.

AWJ: Selina, much of your practice is working in collaboration with your own histories and communities around the world. How have you found your international networks being reshaped through COVID-19, and how do you see work touring or being received internationally in the future, in light of the pandemic?

ST: Within my British network, there's a real networking about our arts sector. There's a Black Writers Guild now and there looks to be a Black Artists Group by the end of the month. The big thing that is happening which is exhilarating is artists organising as workers. It's intense. The UK government introduced a furlough scheme (80% of your wage). This was not open to freelancers. 70% of workers in arts industry are freelancers. And government dialogue with the arts has generally gone through the venues. And this is not representative of the sector. So joining unions and redistributing wealth is really exciting cause it needs to happen. I feel a big anxiety around speed. Will we get there in time? To make the changes we want to make. When I'm plugging into my networks, I'm plugging in as workers (and to worker organisers).

In terms of international work, I went into lockdown two weeks early. Partly because our government is useless. I was on my way to Germany and mid-air the German Government cancelled all performances. Then I had to go home. All the venues we were meant to tour to have postponed performances to a later date. Or people have been moving to digital models.

I have a show called *Salt*, which is the one people often want to tour. I've been asked "will you do a reading of it?" "No" is my response, such a huge part of that work is about a person labouring and you can taste the salt. I'm not going to compromise on that. The is a question about the work that can be maintained. For [Festival Theaterformen](#) in Germany I'm going to be in conversation with an academic, in place of a tour presentation. With Black Lives Matter, the conversation about abolition has become mainstream, and I've been able to work with a Black academic and speak in a different way that feels maybe more useful. In theory I feel okay about it... but I also have questions about what it will feel like post-pandemic. I don't know. No one does. I don't think anyone can know. The biggest challenge is how anyone can sit with uncertainty with grace.

AWJ: Daniel, you've talked about trans-local partnerships, can you talk about how you see those things working together, into the future?

DK: I'm starting to think about stopping using the word 'international' for 'trans-local'. The 'international' in the arts might be anachronistic. Because it's more about market-based, capitalistic buying and selling. It doesn't seem to fit with how we're interacting with each other now. I will continue touring, but what other kinds of relationships can be forged? I aim to build long-term relationships, and I feel it is better encapsulated in the term 'trans-localism'. Interested in how as an artist with my work, when I engage with another artistic milieu, I'm doing more than just showing my work. What's happening now is enabling more self-organisation. The possibility of self-organisation. The Zoom facility. There are many different ways I could bypass modes of production to access and reach the people I want to talk to, quite directly.

Arts centres are having to turn their work into digital platform, looking for alternative ways to keep support artists and artistic projects... but the opposite is also true: now that the arts centre is in crisis, I would like to ask "What can I do as an artist to support your *raison d'être*?" You can't go back to business as usual. What is my role to have conversations with different organisations and institutions? There is a way to speak collaboratively with the infrastructure, as opposed to being at the bottom of the food chain.

AWJ: It makes me think about the re-definition of what leadership looks like. It's exciting. We're returning to the big question that we began with, how can we deal with the big changes post-pandemic, and how can we be inclusive/provide access? What would you like to be seen as a re-set at this time – and taking on Selina's point that there might not be a 'post-pandemic'?

ST: Universal basic income. I'd love it so much if our sector came together as a voice to make it happen – it would open up so much for so many people. Furlough gives a glimpse of this.

DK: Last week, the Singapore Sunday Times, published a strange survey of the top most essential jobs, and the list of most non-essential jobs. Artists were the top of the nonessential list. It got Singaporean artists really upset. And I can understand why artists might be seen in this way. I want to think positively and be optimistic. That is the arts are 'non-essential' does not mean it is not important or relevant. People's sanity and sense of connectedness are really important too. We don't have to think of arts and culture in terms of essentialism, but we need to have different formats to engage with one another. This is where arts and culture is central. Can we think about how the arts and culture can participate in social rehabilitation?

BG: The big shift for us at Back to Back, and our business model, is work in repertoire – we make work and we tour it. We're in a situation that we can't do that nationally and

internationally, as the company has done. It has an impact. It has a significant effect on income and employment. However all our eggs aren't in one basket. We have to really fully embrace the education and community engagement aspect of our work, and put an increased focus on that. It's not as high profile or doesn't draw as much attention as performing in some big festival in Europe, yet it feels self-nurturing. As a company, it's about embracing the situation and focusing on what we're doing in Geelong.

SW: The first things defunded are the sciences and the arts. We specialise in future telling because we imagine futures. Look at Netflix – how many shows are there about pandemics?! We artists saw this coming! I can't talk for other countries, but there's a reason our government is acting like we're invisible – it's a future they don't want for us. There's got to be other ways to find funding and philanthropists: "we want to change the world, are you in?" There'll be people up for it. There are ways, to call philanthropists, and not be afraid of asking. There are other ways for us that aren't government or rich corporations. Artists contribute to carbon expelling; and substantively in terms of mobility by flying. What are other modes of making art and how we can make work locally? How can local community organisations and councils help us work?

AWJ: What an incredible array of question and provocations.

Q&A

NV: Has the pandemic made you think the role of international engagement in your practice?

BG: Yes. We had to totally shift our program. It makes it incredibly hard to plan ahead. Living on an island where there's no flights out. We have been exploring television and film and we're investing in that. We're giving ourselves training in screenwriting. All of it is an experiment. We wouldn't be having it if not for the pandemic.

NV: How have you been able to respond to different formats of your work, and specifically Selina's point about being able to yes or no to different formats of your work?

ST: To be able to say no, you have to know that you can survive financially. Do I feel I can say no because of the context or because I'm furloughed and my wages are okay if I say no? Tension between freelance and salaried. So many freelancers cannot say no right now. This comes back to this freelance beef in our industry. Many can't say no, so have to take what they can when they can. If you're not financially independent, the conditions of a pandemic make it hard to say no to any opportunity, for financial reasons.

DK: When the pandemic kicked off around the world, immediately it was like everyone was in unison: "let's go online and let's think about digitisation". And there was a division between those saying 'yes' and those saying 'no, I don't want to do that'. Nevertheless, online interaction is part of the reality now. Working remotely and interacting through an online interface, using these mediums as different ways to connect socially and professionally. In the context of live performance, even if we are not physically together and I literally cannot touch you, how might this be an artistic question in itself, analogous to how we deal with interactivity, participation or 'breaking the fourth wall in the theatre. Also, since I don't want to have to travel all the time, I might have to accept that this is now a valid way to set up cultural encounters.

NV: How are you relating to your audience in this time?

SW: It's the death of cabaret. You can't sit on anyone's lap! [Ali McGregor's Variety Show](#) is taking a large space at Arts Centre Melbourne and a small number of audience members in that small space, and will perform live, though it's since been suspended due to restrictions being reintroduced. I saw Paul Capsis performing to an empty auditorium. It was sad and somehow so symbolic of this time.

ST: I like the idea of performing a work to one person, or a group of 10. What a Fabergé egg of a work! It makes no sense economically. I do feel really excited about the possibilities, as an artist. There's an online piece called [The Caretaker](#) of a 24 hr stream of an auditorium. If you tune in at the right time you can hear a voice talking – it's beautiful! There are so many ways you can explore ideas with a socially distinct setup.

NV: Given that the means for making work for most artists, do you think it's had a democratising effect? With many artists using the same media for making work, has the pandemic been a leveller of some kind, which may potentially be useful in democratising art across communities?

DK: This is difficult! We're talking about the means of production, and economics of sustainability. That is harder for me to deal with alone because a lot is beyond one's control. But in terms of democratising effect, I might have alluded to something earlier already. What makes me excited is the new found shared openness towards experimentation and the need for different ways of engaging or presenting work. What Selina has described, maybe we'll see more of these performances and it will be easier to promote working with different modes, socially engaged practices. I hope accordingly, more support might be made available to artist working in a range of ways so it's not only resources given to a few mainstream, flagship companies.

BG: I wonder about whether there's push for a generational shift. Younger artists with the technology and being able to move with it quicker. There feels like a lag or a resistance to embracing tech. Maybe it's specific to me, I feel like my journey is as a theatre maker who's resisted making theatre, but as I've gotten older, I've made it into bodies in space and now that's being removed. Someone younger is potentially more open to the possibilities of what theatre could be. In the act of that, there's a democratisation of / a push for equity / a push for equality.

SW: If you look at regional areas that have bad wifi; education in regional areas is a big problem. You have Aboriginal communities who don't have access to laptops, or farming communities who don't have that either. It can't be a leveller unless people have similar access.

NV: Imagine yourself in ten years: 18 June 2030. Tell us what your day was like today.

ST: I pray that the housing market has crashed and I can buy the maisonette next to my Mum and Dad. I have a long-term illness and so does my Mum and Dad, and I can be close to them without wanting to kill them.

Also, to be working in Birmingham, locally and not getting on planes or trains. Wake up, yoga, meditate, and work ~5-hrs a day. I want to see the sunlight. There are people making beautiful Fabergé egg theatre. We'll only be working a 4-day week. I'd spend the first few hours of the day, writing. Last few hours of the day being part of my community. It's sunny. Let's drink beer, and have a BBQ. Everyone can touch again! Go home, and touch each other some more!

SW: I'd probably still wake up and ask why do I still have mental health issues. I'd look after animals. I'm a bit witchy. I'd have moved to the regions, because that's the only place I can afford. I'll be really happy because I'm working locally, and every now and then when I go overseas, I'll be staying for 3-months and being local over there. I'd brush my teeth twice a day, in the morning and at night.

BG: Maybe involves a forest and something calm and relaxing. I want to experience Fabergé egg theatre. Also, I'm seduced by Selina's lifestyle. I'd like to purely embrace watching other people's art, and not have any anxiety around not making my own work. I want to see the Melbourne International Film Festival, lapping it up and being an audience member; being a great audience member. And at times making work. I don't know what kind of work I'll be making.

DK: Like when I go on a big long far away journey, on a mountain top or a cliff... I must not forget, "this is what it is about!" I must not forget this. I hope to be in a forest like Bruce, or on a mountain top. I hope in ten years, I've not forgotten about this pandemic, how I'm not being distracted by information overload, not distracted by what isn't important and the constant 'busy busy busy' mode. I hope by then, I can still connect to today, and feel this unplugging has become permanent.

AWJ: I'm living further in the bush than Sarah. I'll be a crazy lesbian. Everyone will say "Don't go near her! She's too scary". I might occasionally come out to see some theatre.

NV: Somewhat isolated, hopefully people around that I like and I can reach easily. People are the key. Making sure you have those people around that inspire you. Thank you AWJ, thank you Sarah, thank you Selina, thank you Daniel, thank you Bruce.

AWJ: thanks to all panellists – it's been one of the most enjoyable conversations I've been part of. Thoughtfulness, compassion. It's not often that I leave a zoom meeting feeling buoyed up.