

APAM WIRE #10 | Summary Notes **Performance work for multigenerational audiences**

16 September 2020, 14:00 AEST

Speakers:

Jacob Boehme, independent artist
Larissa FastHorse, playwright & choreographer (USA)
Nitya Iyer, Serendipity Festival (India)
Wendy Martin, festival director
Nadine McDonald-Dowd, QPAC

Panel host:
Sue Giles

APAM Host:
Melanie Burge

Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country

Good afternoon everyone, thank you for joining us today for APAM Wire #10. I'm Melanie Burge, Associate Producer at APAM.

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.

Introductions

Panel host – Sue Giles, Artistic Director & Co-CEO of Polyglot Theatre
The panel introduced themselves and responded to the words 'multigenerational practice' and what that means for them.

Nitya Iyer is the Senior Programming Manager, Serendipity Arts Festival, working closely with artists & curators putting together the festival. Her former practice as a dancer strongly informs her curatorial practice. For Nitya, multigenerational means a generation of art practices that are still very relevant today. From broad family audience and the community at large, these performances still reach a broad audience, building capacity for empathy.

Jacob Boehme, a Narangga & Kurna man, is an artist, curator and director of dance, theatre & ceremony across stage, film and festivals. For Jacob, multigenerational means community, and 'normal'. Whether on country or in the rehearsal room; ceremony or performance, everyone is there, physically or in spirit. When making work he is always thinking of his family, and family includes all generations.

Larissa FastHorse is part of the Sicangu & Lakota nations, on the lands now known as USA. For Larissa, multigenerational also means community. In USA, this kind of work is usually considered separate. As a writer Larissa works on 'adult work', and in long term collaborations with communities to make work that is fully determined by them. This is multigenerational work: everyone is participating, it's for everyone.

Nadine McDonald-Dowd is a Yuwibera woman from North Queensland, working as Executive Producer at QPAC with her primary focus on First Nations Programming. For Nadine, multigeneration also means community. It took all of us to create, and culture isn't defined by particular roles: old people teach, young people learn. Everyone comes together to do something to make it happen.

As **Wendy Martin's** career has progressed what interests her most is the arts' capacity to generate empathy & shared experience. In creating a festival for Perth two things were important: sense of place/Country, but also inclusivity, inviting everyone of all ages in. Currently creating [Women of the World](#) festival for Perth. Empowering women and girls to curate and make the festival and tell the stories they want to tell.

Sue: Multi-generational means many things to many people, but seems to have less elitism, and more eclecticism in what is experienced in art or performance, for a broader range of people.

There are three focus areas for today's discussion:

- Making & process
- Philosophy & politics
- Audience & access

Sue: In reference to community practice – how does participation in the creative process change or affect the aesthetics of the work we create?

Larissa: Best known for *Native Nation*, her [7-year collaboration with Cornerstone Theatre](#), and currently making her third piece in community. They've taken Cornerstone's 35-year old process and indigenised it, made it more radical, in the way that participation is included in everything. The community has final veto over every word or action, and that veto never expires. In the USA the performing & visual arts have been an extraction industry, with non-Indigenous people taking what they see is valuable, then leaving and profiting from it. Cornerstone Theatre process flips this and co-opts western art for community benefit. When making art for mainstage companies Larissa still involves local Traditional Owners, and they also have veto over the work. The first two plays made with Cornerstone have been highly participatory for audience also, where they feel empowered and served by the art.

Sue: Where does the artist sit? What is the relationship there?

Jacob: Currently leading the Wild Dog project, connecting Dingo Dreaming through SA, NSW, Southern QLD. Jacob's own family belongs to that Dreaming. In connecting the songlines, Jacob's role as lead artist is to be the facilitator or receiver of instructions, not an Elder who can make decisions. Down south, the project is reconnecting/reviving. Up north, it's maintaining cultural practice. The whole idea is to reconnect, to pass on instructions and information to the next generation. Jacob's job to create space for that to happen. This is circular art making – like yidaki and circular breathing – fulfilling obligations by reviving and maintaining cultural practice but also bringing new things, like stop motion animation, film, graphic novels, puppetry shows. Asking how they want to tell this, and always guided by Elders.

Sue: Nitya – how does celebration of art in public space change how audience or community recognise art?

Nitya: Serendipity Festival has achieved a balance in its four editions between celebratory performances and more experimental work which takes place in unexpected locations. Festival actively gauges audience response to experimental works. Approach dictated Content is king: who is it that content for, who will watch it? when is it scheduled and where? When you triangulate those things is when you see celebration, recognition.

Sue: Thinking of recognition, who thinks of this as art? A community happening or event?

Nadine: Sees herself not as an artist but a conduit. Remembers an Uncle saying: we never looked at the clock and said it's 2 o'clock, it's time to dance. When her people were creative not weren't thinking about the clock or the audience but why is this story

important to be shared? So, for Nadine *intent* is primary. What is art is up to spirits and ancestors to determine.

The place Nadine works now is a modern performing arts centre with many spaces and moving parts. But what was here before was a performing ground, with bora rings, with people being creative on that country for 60,000 years.

Sue – Wendy, what does place mean to you?

Wendy: After she arrived in Perth, [Noongar Elder Richard Walley](#) met her in Kings Park and they walked and Steve spoke of stories, medicines, and sung her into country. Wendy was determined to share that knowledge through the festival. South Western WA is a biodiversity hotspot for the world: how to tell stories about that? Wendy brought artists together with Elders, scientists to make a 1.5km walk called Trees Speak. The six seasons were projected, along with creation stories, and there was an installation made by 5000 school children based on a list of endangered species.

Sue: Is interested in this inclusive/encompassing experience the panellists are discussing. What is 'real theatre', and what is this other thing? How is this work perceived?

Larissa: Reminded of a recent piece *Native Nations*, made in Arizona where there are 22 tribes. This work had 400 participants and was an all-day festival, with a scripted performance at the end. Our theatre has not been coded as theatre, because of the lack of research. Larissa 'code switches' using western terms – calls it participatory, immersive, environmental – to draw people in.

Nadine: In western festivals we've been brainwashed that it has to be go-go-go all the time. She finds it precious to switch to community time, community pace, do work that brings people together over a long period of time. It's part of the immersiveness and the beauty.

Jacob: The current situation has forced us into a position to re-engage with the function of art and what it means to community. All of a sudden local work, site-specific work is 'a thing'. The labels professional artist and community artist can be forced on artists, whereas he doesn't see it that way, it's all his practice.

Nitya: Inclusivity is an important mandate for the festival. Shared example of family-run company in Hyderabad, [Surabhi Theatre](#). Family of 60 performs, members aged 6-65 yrs. The techs are also family members. They tour as a self-contained unit. At home they live backstage of their venue. They have passed on this form of drama down the generations, there's an extraordinary authenticity. Bringing them to the festival opened opportunities for them, but also made festival understand more about inclusivity because the visual communication of their work was so strong.

Sue: What is the role of leader and what it means when everyone is included?

Wendy: Jude Kelly wanted the Southbank Centre (London) to be a home for all. She introduced a series of festivals across the year. Wendy observed the skateboarders who come in their hundreds every day who come to skate there and talked to them about what they'd like to see. Back in WA, in Albany for the Great Southern program of Perth Festival, initiated a [project](#) in a 40 yr old skateboarding park, the world's oldest community-funded park. It was a 3-generation project led by WA artist Annette Carmichael. USA skating legend Russ Howell who originally opened the park returned to participate, and visual artist and skater Shaun Gladwell got involved. Being part of the project transformed how those skateboarders felt about themselves and their own stories.

Sue: Can everyone be an artist? The Western theatre would say no.

Larissa: says everyone can be a playwright. She is self-taught. If you can talk you can write: theatre is just people talking. One of Larissa's favourite theatres is in South Dakota, a small theatre on the prairie with horses running by and through. They perform there and help young people see that they too can write plays and perform them. In the work *Rain*, the babies are making that work, owning the space.

Jacob: That's an interesting question now when ICIP (Indigenous Cultural & Intellectual Property) is important for protecting information and culture. In the Wild Dog project, he's facilitating meeting and dialogue between generations so that Elders can meet their obligation to pass on knowledge. They are working for and with kids and providing a communal experience of that cultural obligation to keep culture strong. Again, circular art making. They are partnering with schools in different countries. The kids need to think about how to translate that material for a pen pal, say in Taiwan. Individual creative expression from communal and collective source material.

Nadine: Example of a project run by [Inala Wangarra](#) community organisation in Brisbane. It's not always easy to make a multigenerational story if you don't think about the complex cultural, historical context for participants. In this project children listen to story then make self-portraits then create their own museum. They become artists, curators, tour guides to take visitors through their collections and stories of their communities. It's about keeping culture strong.

SG: We are centring the family unit within this discussion. We notice the impact of current events on families. We are having this discussion as part of APAM today. How sellable is this work?

Wendy: The work we're discussing today belongs in space and in community. [Amy Sharrocks' Museum of Water](#) example, originally made in the UK. Wendy thought this seemed like the perfect project for WA, such a dry state. They remade it specifically for this place. Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphreys' [5 Short Blasts](#) was also remade for WA, grounded in Noongar history and the ports. Beautifully conceived projects can be reimaged in other places.

Sue: Is there more focus on free art in this space?

Wendy: The Museum of Water was free and 20,000 people came. 5 Short Blasts was ticketed because of its nature. But we also must remember power of theatre and power of experiencing that work with audience, for example Polyglot & Papermoon's [Cerita Anak](#).

Nadine: Often struck by seeing young people experiencing art for the first time. Her people always had a voice but not necessarily a *platform*. Gathering everyone together and giving young people a place to be respected and heard is vitally important.

LF: Building on that, in traditional theatre we have to do whatever is needed to facilitate access by the whole community: Elder seating, flexible FOH practice, a pacing area for parents with babes in arms. We must make sure that whole multigenerational family units can come to all work, or they won't come at all. Keeping that whole multigenerational unit together is a key element of Larissa's practice.

Sue: Question from the Q&A, how would a multigenerational approach to making and presenting art affect the way that aspiring 'professional' artists are trained? What change would we need to see in training institutions?

Nitya: In India training could be community run, family run, like Surabhi Theatre. If it is not community run, need someone to guide artists in the nuances of multigenerational work. Multigeneration work as a discipline has a lot of history to it.

Jacob: Remember the political dimension. This question assumes that institutions are equitable and fair, however look at the retention rates of First Nations and People of Colour and they are very poor. In Australia, our contemporary theatre and dance sectors burst out of the Black Power movements of the 1960s & 1970s. Our contemporary theatre expression is all rooted in political struggle and is therefore conscious of class, positionality, economics. Yet looking at the theatre programmed within institutions, those elements – class, race, political opinions even – are almost removed.

I've been making some of the current generation of students aware of what their political power is. I've been working with university students in Chennai. I ask them to listen to country (as in their birthplace) and their community, then identify what tools they already have to create artistic or political activations to be of benefit to their community.

Nadine: Here at QPAC, which is not First Nations led like many major venues, it sometimes takes a big change in the focus of that organisation and takes time. Going back to what was said earlier about leadership, it comes down to having an effective challenge of leadership.

Sue read a question from Q&A: In programming work for multigenerational context do you start with work or start with audience?

Nitya: I think you start with work. At Serendipity, always start with the content then the placement, audience flow from that content.

Sue: Do you ever surprise yourself?

Nitya: Every year we surprise ourselves! Example of a protest music & animation project placed in a container in public space. They had no idea whether audience would venture in to engage, then it worked and they needed to control numbers.

Sue: Noted eclecticism of the form and placement of this work, and the effect of location on audience experience.

Nadine: Sometimes work doesn't need a ticketed audience to quantify its value. For example, at QPAC there have been moments of just doing workshops or staged readings for a small contained audience of cast/crew/community and that is still valuable, whether the project continues past that point or not.

Jacob: Worked with audience first and foremost in making the framework for Yirramboi. What are my family, my community, going to enjoy? What will benefit them? A lot of the civic spaces in City of Melbourne had previously been denied to my parents and grandparents, so there was a lot of work to make spaces culturally safe. In programming a First Nations festival I privileged First Nations audiences first. There is enough work targeting white audiences.

Wendy: Example of Yirra Yaakin's production of [Hecate](#). It was performed in language with no translation. What was most important was that the actors learnt their language so they could perform the work. Around the work, the audience invited into Noongar culture – outside in the garden were people to talk about Noongar culture, spirituality, medicine, ways. On the face of it the audience weren't offered a translation but actually they were offered much more: it was a deeply authentic representation of this place. The performers were central, and people responded to that.

Sue: Q&A: How do you work with conflict, or opposing views?

Larissa: Example of a conflict of views about staging during a project in Arizona, which is not her country, so Larissa couldn't decide, but as lead artist she could facilitate the process. Brought the community to come together and agree on who could decide. The elder made the decision and that was that.