

Looking back on Australian Theatre Forum 2009

Talk for Theatre Network Victoria, at APAM 2010

Towards an Australian Theatre Forum 2011

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What will we do now?

The question is deliberately ambivalent
Either momentous, post a catastrophe
Or a casual enquiry, the next step of unfolding process.

I am drawn to the drama of world events, the six months leading up to the forum had their share...GFC and Black Sat...- the question of human survival an imperative following the collapse of the global economy and the devastation of the environment, both life threatening in diff. ways.

I knew others were maybe more sanguine, maybe more hopeful..
So for those with their eyes set firmly on the road ahead to the next production I hoped the question might also offer an interesting hook into artform development if nothing else.

But back to the drama:

Of course when the chips are down its tempting to think that art is not the thing that will make the difference. But whilst the economists, the politicians, the lobbyists, the campaigners, the activists, the business moguls all seem so plausible and necessary and yet often incapable of making the changes, I believe that cultural change is the most important change of all....

How we are with each other, how we express ourselves, the stories we tell each other in so many different ways, that's what makes it possible for things to be different between people, and for different futures to be imagined and moved towards.

So the use of Open Space as the main process for the forum, which for those who weren't there is a self organising method where people set their own agendas and facilitate their own discussions), was a way to explore not only issues, with the prompt question Art begins with risks what risks should we be taking now? but also processes, the ways we could have conversations, the culture of change making.

And having decided on that everything else led towards that experience and away from it. From the mapping of our shared 30 year history, to the ideas we were having right now, to the stimulus of 5 speakers covering a new vision of indigenous rights by Tim Goodwin who I feel sure will be Australia's president when we finally get one...

The elder Eva Cox's perspective as a passionate audience member of 60 plus years

Kelly O' shanessy' s vision of a sustainable world where you could read books in the bath without them going soggy

Tim Joss's provocation to stop funding major cultural orgs and fund research instead

And Jurg Karrenbauer from Rimini Protocoll discussing the blurring of professional artists and non artists and predicting some bizarre futuristic possibilities.

And then before we moved into action planning we jointly (with Robyn Archer's help) decided how to spend \$1000, and heard some salutary and deeply moving accounts of the need for failure as a friend of innovation.

I was deeply impressed by the eagerness, generosity and integrity with which the majority, dare I say everyone engaged with this process. It was inspiring, it was motivating and it filled me with hope and, after 4 years of living in London, I was glad to be home again.

6 mths on some of the warm fuzzy of being with 100's of passionate motivated colleagues and friends has gone, but for me a small and growing group of artists/producers/people who met to discuss Alice's topic Help save the planet, have been meeting since the forum and have begun a new story of possibilities.

Wooden Mushroom as we call ourselves, shares networks, ideas, fears and home cooked food, who knows where the story goes, but we will be the ones that decide. And that feels really good.

And there will be three gatherings of Tipping Point Australia, a UK based org that facilitates conversation and connection between artists and scientists responding to climate change, in October and November this year in Melb Malthouse, Sydney The Performance Space and Brisbane and supported by the British Council and others, catalysing a series of commissions and residencies with artists, scientists and communities.

Another ATF thread

Unprofessionalism - and John Bayliss's exhortation to drop the word and put the emphasis on truth, virtuosity and enquiry.

A group of currently 5 women, loosely called Unprofessional Women's association have had unincorporated Christmas wreath making meetings and plan to support each other through homecrafts and vibrant discussions as their passions and values intrude upon and overwhelm the sometimes bizarrely unhelpful professional structures we operate within.

Scanning the list of themes and discussions some that prick my interest are:
Audiences and how to get closer to them
Internationalism and how to make it more meaningful
Indigenous theatre and how non indig theatre could collaborate(not by sessions like this being programmed at the same time!)
Diversity and the need to be it not have it
The role of research in practice and practice in research

Without wanting to be too reductive or too Pollyanna I can't help but feel that the growing imperative to change our economic model to one in which we can live with equity within our planet's resources has the power to transform all those issues and others in potentially glorious ways...

As the enviro movement launches T 10 the decade of transition, 4 years of campaigning and then a roll out of renewable energies...
What is the culture sector going to do to change its habits, its old reliance on a mode of production that will surely end...?
If the black bottom line is no longer the imperative, then who better to move into that space, as artists as producers who have never been driven by that bottom line anyway, and recreate a different set of relationships?

Where audiences become research partners/collaborators
Where product become just one outcome of a research process
Where the old hierarchies of funding disintegrate and diversity flourishes
And the indigenous cultures of this land and their contemporary expression are treasured for their ancient knowledge and new wisdoms as we re learn our relationship with nature.

And here at APAM, wouldn't that become a southern hemisphere artists meet, where we would be exchanging ideas, skypeing with our northern hemisphere friends (some of whom already aren't here this year because of the carbon miles) planning year long collaborations, with year long travels, interspersed with family friendly residencies, so when you finally get to see someone from somewhere else or be somewhere else rather than the smash and grab of an international tour, you are a honoured guest and a privileged host .

Thank you to the committee and the Aus Co that offered me the role, it was one of the most pleasurable and stimulating projects I have done in my life, professionally and unprofessionally. I look forward to the next one.

And if anyone wants to join either Wooden Mushroom or Unprofessional Women Assoc (and men are welcome by the way, that's how unprofessional we are) please see me after the session or send me your email and I'll join you up...

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