

ALL TALK: HOW MIGHT WE BUILD A STRONGER PLAYWRITING CULTURE?



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Foreword

On Saturday 16 November 2019, the Centre for Dramaturgy and Curation hosted ALL TALK: an 8-hour open dialogue about playwriting, at Siteworks, Brunswick. No keynotes, no experts, no agenda - just one very long chat in a room of our peers about where we're at, where we're headed, and how we might build a stronger playwriting culture. We wanted to make something non-hierarchical, open access, and that anyone could participate in and ask anything they liked.

The room was set up with two seated areas - one for people to be active participants in the conversation, the other for people to sit back and listen. This framework broke down over the course of the day.

The following is an edited transcript of 8 hours of continuous conversation. The transcript has been prepared from an audio recording, edited for clarity, and simplified where necessary to make this a coherent, concise record of the conversation that took place.

The transcript has been broken up into exchanges with subheadings for ease of reading and reference, but the experience of the event was one of continuous uninterrupted conversation.

For the sake of consistency and relative anonymity I've chosen not to label the speakers by name, except for naming myself as the person who started and ended the session. After that, I've allocated a letter of the alphabet to each new speaker in an exchange, resetting those allocations with each exchange. This means that person 'A' in one section may be different to person 'A' in the following section. There were 37 participants over the course of the conversation.

Editing for clarity has meant that I've condensed some arguments, but I've attempted at every point to maintain the integrity of what the speaker said and how they said it. I've chosen to abridge sections where participants are discussing a point of fact for an extended period, or misremembering information that is readily available elsewhere.

We hope this transcript serves as a truthful reflection of the conversation that was had. If you have any questions, suggestions or concerns about this transcript, please get in touch. We're happy to make edits as needed so it respectfully reflects the voices of those who took part in the conversation.

Thanks to David Ryding at Melbourne City of Literature for reaching out to offer financial support in catering the event, and to Siteworks for their ongoing support of the Centre for Dramaturgy and Curation. And thanks above all to those who came along.

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9:00 AM WELCOME

[There are seven people in the room.]

MARK: It's 9am.

Thanks for coming to ALL TALK. I want to start by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners of this land, whose sovereignty has never been ceded, and pay my respects to their Elders past present and emerging. There are bathrooms just outside this room, beside the stairs. There's a kitchen down the hall, and snacks to the side of the room.

This is a self-funded event, but Melbourne City of Literature have also chipped in to offer us some catering, so I want to thank them for that. You can come and go as you like, but the aim of today is for us to maintain a continuous conversation for 8 hours about playwriting.

There'll be no official breaks, so just take care of yourself - do what you need to do when you need to do it. Come and go as you need. I wanted to invite everyone down here to talk to 8 hours because I feel like there's a lot to talk about. So without prescribing what that is I wanted to open the floor a bit, create a space for anyone to speak, and where we might be able to get to the guts of it, whatever it is. And I wanted to record the whole 8 hours too, which will be transcribed and edited into something useable, as an attempt to capture the voice of the moment we're in right now.

Anyone can step up and join us - I just ask that they introduce themselves by name into the recorder and to the group. And anyone can offer a question to the group - just by writing it down on a sheet of paper, announcing it to the group and putting it into the circle. So hopefully we'll have a buildup of questions over the course of the day, and we can jump back to things we might have skipped over. And if you want to step out of the inner circle at any point, go for it.

There's a lot of flux going in the industry and in the community, a lot of uncertainty and instability but also possibility, and the guiding question in my mind that I wanted to put to the group today is: How might we build a stronger playwriting culture?

And it's a big question. Uh, it's, it's kind of the end game in a ways. So, uh, so with that in mind, I also wanted to wind back a bit and talk about what's going on now and how we got here. And five of you have chosen to join me here at 9:00 AM, so I want to put it to you - or at least the three people who are in the inner circle right now - What do you think we need to be talking about right now?

[Pause]

B: I feel like I have a big question about community. And there's a lot of language around the industry as a community. But my experience with the last couple of years has shown me that, more often than not, it's actually a collection of individuals interested in the same form. And my instinct is that part of the answer of how we might be a stronger playwriting culture is actually looking at how community as a framework can help. Particularly in the indie sector, we already really exist on a barter economy and what it might mean to formalize that, or really lean into the fact that we as people are each other's greatest resource and trying to move away from this more competition based paradigm. Um, yeah. So that's something I'd be interested in exploring today.

A: When you talk about the barter economy - what kinds of things are you talking about?

B: Like bumping in each other's shows. Or on my most recent show where we borrowed a bunch of sound and lighting tech from another company because they had their own stock. And I guess like working out what sort of resources we have and how they can be exchanged and shared. All those things that exist beyond a purely financial framework. Is there a possibility of setting up some sort of system to record, say like, I contributed eight hours to helping a show bump in and I then have eight hours in the ledger for someone to come and observe rehearsal and give me feedback. You know, that kind of thing. Like, is there some sort of ledger that we can create that also allows us to engage beyond our direct friendship network and meet new people as well? I just feel like there's something in there between relationship and economy between community and economy, which I think could be helpful.

A: And how do you set up an economy? I find your use of that word really interesting. How do you establish an economy in any society? How does a currency emerge, in regards to the challenge of pushing it outside of the immediate friendship circles? I guess economies emerge based on mutual trust, like we all believe a dollar is a dollar, I believe eight hours bump-in is equal to 8 hours of feedback. We have to somehow find a way of building a bank, and an exchange rate.

B: A fundamental feature in an economy is having a surplus. So I don't really know what that would look like, but I wonder if it's to do with us acknowledging that the resource bank or the resource pool that we have is greater than we think it is. That actually there's a pool of resources that's stretched beyond, "I've got \$3,000 in the bank". It's like actually "I can do these 10 things."

A: When New Working Group started, it was in many ways about waste - that we are making all this stuff all the time, and then there's all this kind of by-products. I essentially build a company every time I make a show, and then I dismantle it, because I'm not necessarily going to work with that playwright again, or I'm gonna work in a different way. We need a fresh budget, we want a clean slate, we file for bankruptcy and start again.

- C: Perhaps it's a conversation that could be started with Theatre Network Australia (TNA). Not only in terms of setting up some kind of virtual ledger of people's time, but also as you say, it's the huge waste of flats and ladders and all that stuff you buy and then go "well I can't use it anymore." You throw it away. But people already have rostra, you just don't know who's got them. Or there are private schools who use them for their musicals at the end of the year, and that's about it. That could be a fantastic resource for people who are super cash poor.
- D: And some time hiring this equipment is more expensive than buying it, so you end up buying it and throwing it out when there's no space to store it.
- C: I've been in a number of conversations about independent theatre before where we've had this exact conversation and no one's ever taken it up. But it could be something that actually TNV - now TNA - could actually potentially resource that. It's a very specific way of starting this conversation.
- A: Why do you think it doesn't start up?
- C: Exactly as you said - because it's the most fluid end of the theatre industry. If MTC (Melbourne Theatre Company) is the most concrete literal bricks and mortar thing, than independent theatre is by its nature dynamic. It's the most dynamic of our sectors. But that means that it's people are flowing through continually. And they might want to start it, but then three years later when they're working regularly somewhere they go "Oh well I'll just junk all that stuff that I've amassed - costumes and props." Because there are real costs to storing and maintaining it.
- A: And MTC must've had that with the way that the wardrobe and props stores are set up. Because so many people borrow stuff that they had to designate a two hour block where you can come, you make an appointment, you pay a fee for the staff's time. They sort of put that back on the independent company, which works out fine - If I'm paying 80 bucks to visit the prop store and borrow whatever I want for me show - that's pretty sweet. Compared to spending much more elsewhere getting myself. To set this up the independent sector would have to all buy in substantially, in some way. And someone has to make it their personal project.
- C: It might be a fascinating thing in terms of getting a sense of who's out there at any one time, and then because these things can exist for such a long time now (until the cloud crashes) that you can actually get a sense of how big that independent sector is. I mean it was certainly something that we tried to do when I was at Playwriting Australia - we'll get to that -.

[A burst of laughter from the group]

A: ... and it's ten past nine!

C: We talked about at least trying to increase communication between people. We're so siloed obviously within a city, and siloed within the sectors in that city. Certainly then you can't communicate with people in Perth or Sydney or Brisbane or Cairns or Canberra or wherever, so that people could go "Oh look at the size of what they've got." We were wondering how we can increase that conversation and increase some kind of sense of connection between different artists working across Australia.

To praise the moderator - Mark has set up a kind of nascent Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of Australia organization. We had our first conversation the other day. It was great to get a sense of how many commissions are up, how people are working in each company. Just at that level as well. To increase that communication is really valuable.

A: The independent sector is so unregulated or unexamined as to the kind of economies that are going on, the way people are being contracted. Like are people setting up contracts and agreements with each other? They're doing it informally in some way. There are comprehensive contracts if you're working in an Equity approved fully paid context, but how do you set standards or common protocols when you don't have enough money. When there's not enough to go around, how do you work out what's fair and what's reasonable?

C: The union is the biggest resource we have, at least it's the one contract you can go to to get the MEAA standard. You look at that and go "If that's the base, how close can we get to it?" Here's an organization that is looking to regulate to ensure that there are safe work practices.

A: I remember looking at their contracts because they had an independent sector contract. I'm not sure if they've updated it recently. Glen, you're nodding, have you used it?

[We talk about contracts, and then about the messiness of intellectual property, particularly around new work and collaborative projects]

9:13 AM THE BREADTH OF CONTEMPORARY PLAYWRITING

A: I guess that kind of speaks to probably another topic for today - How is the breadth of playwriting being accommodated in the 21st century? How big is that bucket, that spectrum? What is a play now? Particularly in the independent sector. What has shared authorship done to the play as a form? I'm just thinking about like all the hybrid and how much they're being acknowledged as being part of playwriting culture, or just as this weird independent thing.

B: It was one of my bugbears in recent years around Playwriting Australia on fire. That there seemed to be more fixed definitions of what playwriting is and what it isn't. But you can still be working on the craft of playwriting without necessarily just being playwright in a conventional sense, you know.

So many people are performing in their work now, or just working in different models where these roles blur. That's always been happening, but I feel very aware of it now as a really substantial practice. Has it always been happening?

- C: When I came into the professional world of theater that was a very alive question. What does the play consist of anymore? And certainly that was one of the reasons for the creation of Playworks, you know, that the ANPC was seen as very much the organisation that would deal with THE PLAY . And then part of what Playworks' remit grew from is not just about being an organization purely for female creatives, but that the notion of the play need to be expanded. And so during John Baylis's time with the Australia council they were trying to cut their costs in a way. In around 2005, 2006 the key organisations had to pick whether they were an 'Explorer' or a 'Hub'... are you all too young to know about this?

As part of one of the many cuts to the Australia Council, the many many small to medium companies had to make a decision, in order to qualify for funding - you are either an artistic hub, like La Mama, or you're an artistic explorer, where people gather around a central creative person. And so while people were tearing their hair out about that, that was when they decided to cut down the number of playwriting organisations they were funding across the country, in what was seen as a merger. And so people were very anxious and people very cross with me (at the newly established/merged PWA), wanting me to make a decision about what we were going to fund. So I suppose I tried to be relatively open-minded about that, at that time, but that was my decision at that time.

- B: Do you feel like some of that organizational knowledge got lost around Playworks and the work they were doing? I was lucky enough to go to like the last Playworks conference. They seemed to have a kind of farewell. It was up in Sydney. And there was kind of amazing display of readings and things. People working in such a range of ways. All female led projects as well. I've got a book on my shelf that archives all the different kinds of forms of text. There's some amazing things in it. Looking back at it, compared to the kind of work that I've seen had come out of Playwriting Australia more recently, or the kind of ways in which they frame the work - it seems quite far away. Do you think that expanded definition of playwriting shrunk at that moment?
- C: I don't think so. It's open to discourse. In terms of organisational stuff, uh, there were many entreaties made to us about what to keep and what not to keep. And so we, at that time we tried to go for three things: one of which was more communication between companies, one of which was kind of artist-led process, and one of which was showcasing - we've got to sell some of this stuff. So the only real public thing that then existed was the Playwright's Conference. And having done many of them, it seemed that it was fundamentally broken backed. Because it was only two weeks of the year, you'd spend the week, you know, doing workshop and then you go, Oh

my God, all the people are coming - quick! Stop inventing! Shut up!

And so it was a different thing. And so it seemed like there are better ways we could spend the money to allow us to still experiment, but then also have another thing that was about showcasing. And I know for PWA the money got tighter and tighter obviously, but that's the same for every key org. I mean I still think it's a very active question and in some ways it felt like the pendulum shifted way back the other way - that that sense in the sixties and seventies, you know, 'it's all cool man. Do whatever you want.' That that in a way shrunk over the 80s into, let's actually talk again about the play. Yeah. And maybe now we're moving away from that again? Sorry, I got very generational there. I read a play during the week, which was a very conservative Catholic play, and a particular character in the play loves this particular theory that I'd never heard of called The Fourth Turning.

[The speaker goes on to explain the Strauss-Howe generational theory, as established in their 1991 book 'Generations'. In short, this theory proposes that historical events are associated with recurring generational personas or archetypes. Each generational persona unleashes a new era (called a turning) lasting around 20-22 years, in which a new social, political, and economic climate exists. The theory states that, after every saeculum of 80-90 years, a crisis recurs in American history, followed by a recovery, in which institutions and communitarian values are strong again. Ultimately, succeeding generational archetypes attack and weaken institutions in the name of autonomy and individualism, which ultimately creates a tumultuous political environment that ripens conditions for another crisis. This theory has been re-popularised by right wing US media mogul Steve Bannon, and is fairly widely criticised.]

So you could imagine why he's looking for a theory that will explain what's happening in America right now. And that's why we're getting to this kind of extraordinary apocalyptic moment - that we're heading to a war and keep on going.

[The speaker explains the plot of the play, which is called 'Heroes of the Fourth Turning' by Will Arbery. The speaker then explains the idea the play leads to: the 'Benedict option']

Benedict Mercier was a Bishop in the early, early, early Catholic church and as Rome literally was falling apart in the end of the fifth century, he went, you know what, the only way out of this is to go to a small place and just be in a small group. And that's the only way we can keep knowledge. And we can communicate slowly with those other places on the mountain top. This is the beginning of monasticism so that sense that we have to retreat from the sinning, collapsing world. That's the only way through. We have to retreat and it's a question of "how do we engage with the world?" So it's a kind of ontological question, but it's also a theological question for America. So it's a question of if you a conservative, do you retreat and don't we should just wait for the horror pass, or do you reject the Benedict option and get in the world and fan the flames of that fire.

[We talk about theatre as a kind of church, as a space of multiplicity, inspiration. A place of possibility, where new ideas are drafted, tried out, considered, scrapped, reimagined. We talk about intergenerational amnesia.]

9:25 AM INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

- A: Another major question in the ecology is: what is our attitude towards our elders, or our relationship with elders. Mentorship as a concept doesn't really exist outside of very informal structures. So what is being done in terms of that transmission of knowledge? Yes there's archives of plays, which are rapidly being defunded, but who are living archives? Who is holding our theatre histories, and how is that being mined? Or is it even being mined?
- B: Critics are the biggest ones doing that - that's where I get my most intergenerational knowledge about that work that's been happening, following artists over time. Richard Watts and Alison Croggon are two people that I feel like I get that knowledge from more readily. Who speak intergenerationally. Who've seen so much work come and go, and have written about it. And yet they are some of the worst paid people in the industry.
- C: Then there's the difference between criticism and newspaper reviews, which are more quick-turn-around reactions to things by their very nature. I think it's what John McCallum does really well in Sydney - his book *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th century* looks at the moment, and considers what's come before it and where are we going. That's the mark of good criticism.
- It is for a different audience as well. Its for a punter, and it's a form of publicity. Whereas Croggon and reviewers like her are creating both an archival, and a form of feedback for the makers. It bolsters the creatives and gives them a sense of grounding as to who they are in time and the very large history of theatre in which you're working.
- D: For many young and emerging playwrights there's a real question of how to get their plays out of the drawer and get that feedback. Without the networks, its difficult to know how to take that crucial first step. Where is the space where that play can be read out by some actors, so I can hear it and thus do more development of it? Let alone where is the space where I can, with some degree of low risk, put my play in front of people to get that live feedback about what's working?
- E: That's why actor playwrights are often more successful. Because they can just call their friends.
- B: There's a lot of playwrights who aren't performers. Where do people cut their teeth to go from writing good text to writing great text when that initial level isn't getting any oxygen.

A: What we're talking about here is empowerment. How do we empower writers? I think a lot of power is taken away from writers because they're reliant on other people to get their plays on.

9:41 AM THE D.I.Y. MENTALITY

A: You've had a lot of plays on - do you feel like you're relying on other people in order to get your plays up?

B: I do feel like I am more reliant on that now at this point in my career as maybe like a mid-career-ish writer. But initially I think earlier on I was an actor playwright. And it's funny cause it's something I'd be very reluctant to do now - but I'd call my friends and get them to read it. I did a play reading in the top room of a pub. I was lucky to know enough people to invite, and that was all people I only knew through acting. I don't know how I would have met people in theatre if I hadn't started as an actor. I can't imagine wanting to be a playwright and somehow magically meeting people. Because you meet through doing things. If you're a writer and you're not working on other people's shows, then how do you meet people?

A: You both knew the people and you'd seen someone put on a play-reading before. You've been in plenty of ramshackle rooms where someone's reading a play out. So you knew that that's how it's done.

B: This was maybe six or eight years ago, and it felt like there was a lot of people doing shows in houses and it just felt like that was how things worked. So I was very fortunate to have that understanding. Whereas now I teach playwriting and in the last class of the semester I say, alright, let's talk about how you can now get these scripts on. And people say they're going to apply for Fringe or various opportunities, and I have to say "you know that you can do this in a park, or in your house, in your backyard. You can just do it for your friends. but I feel like there's a bit less, maybe there's a bit less of a culture of that now. I don't know.

A: What makes that cultural dissipate? Okay. I'm curious about, cause I, I totally agree with you that that seems to be happening on the hall.

B: It comes back to what they were saying about to finding success. But also I think in maybe in Melbourne there's this idea of like, so okay, we started with an initial staging, all that and it's like a smaller place and it's a little more chill and it's a small stage and it's great and we'll invite people from bigger theaters to come see it and then that'll kind of start a conversation for us with them. Or that will maybe give the play a second life or that will maybe get it a review so we can get some funding. And so I think because of first showing is so often tied with not just the future of play, but um, extending a compensation for your career, it becomes a little more like, yeah, Mark, come to my house and see my plate. It sounds a little dodgy, but like, but it's kind of, it's getting us back to the idea of write something,

put it on, doesn't have a way to create something special and know that people will come. Yeah. I just find it funny that we can, because - I did a Fringe show that ended up being in a house, but only because we left it really late to find the venue. We wanted to do it in a theater.

And I find that the young people that I teach and work with always want to have like they write something for like the MTC stage. But the thing is: I want to see this in a share house or car park. And maybe it's from where I've come from, or some romanticisation of this period. But I'm sort of telling them to start there. It's not just about being able to do things on the cheap or not being stuck in some sort of development cycle. But actually it's exciting to see. That might sound a bit like romanticising the notion of people making work in poverty.

C: That speaks to something that we haven't raised at all yet, which is curious, which is the audience. And that's a crucial part of this conversation, which is that you learned your craft by putting it on in a toilet cubicle, or on a roof, but to people who are right there and you learn that ability to have that regular conversation with an audience. But when you want to work out how to speak to a larger audience - that's tricky. There is a point where you want to go to that 300 seat audience, and that's trickier because the costs are so much higher.

B: I think it's worth mentioning that I say this, like I did, you know, like it was something that happened regardless of the funding situation. But actually at that point in my career I had gotten an Art Start grant which meant I could hire a studio, which meant I could have a rehearsal space, which meant I could buy a printer. Little things, but its important not to discount how much the funding state at the moment is robbing those young artists of that opportunity. It's not that they're just lazy and they're not doing it. I had a lot of opportunities because it was a much healthier, more fertile funding state. There was a sense of possibility - that you can do this in your backyard, and then you can apply for these emerging artist programs, and you can apply for an Artstart grant - there's this sense of people wanting to give you money and opportunities. Whereas now I don't know what opportunities to tell students to go for - there's not a lot. There's nowhere really.

There's also the emotional and kind of spiritual difference that that funding culture makes. Getting that Artstart Grant gave me such a sense of confidence and importance and investment. There's a difference in how it's affecting the self-esteem of young writers. Someone wants me to start making work. I'm being told to do this as opposed to everything telling me that this isn't going to happen.

9:48 AM GIG ECONOMY

A: I think the real problem now is that because we all have to juggle the day job, and it takes longer to make a piece of work that you're happy with. And so you're less willing to just kind of go, I'll just chuck it on in the backyard

and then I'll move on and write another one. I spent so long with this thing cause, you know, I've worked five days a week so I only get the weekend and so, you know, I'm not just gonna throw it on and then bang out another one.

Day jobs are becoming less stable. Everyone's working three part time jobs, or short term contract jobs. So you're spending all your time applying for jobs rather than applying for grants or making the work itself. It just makes you hate art.

- B: It's really this combination of funding and time. We work in a group devised context, and all of our plays are scripted through a group-devised process. But the issue of getting everyone in the room together has become almost impossible now. And we see the trend towards the solo production which is in part driven by funding, but I think time is also a factor - exactly for those reasons. People don't work the same schedules. The interest in work is strong, but the time is not there. And it becomes a real obstacle.
- C: And the reality is you have to put a price on your time. We live in a gig economy where you are charging by the hour because no one has a full time job anymore. The playwriting economy sits within a much broader economy that is changing rapidly. We're talking about young people and about class and people don't have the spare time working on other things, particularly when you want to take that next step - its such a hustle. Like you have to go to all the networking events. You have to know everyone. Like even this thing of creating a community, it's like "what if you don't have time?"

9:53 AM CAREER LONGEVITY

- A: Or what if it's inaccessible to you? For multiple reasons. Economics or geography or caring duties or whatever. When you are young and emerging and you've got this key period of maybe a few years where you can do everything - you would've seen this a lot over the years, Chris - There's a lot of energy and buzz around someone, and then it has to drop off as the life stuff comes in. And unless somehow you hit that mark early on, you've got no chance. Don't have kids in the middle of that seven years, or caring duties, or some other - something else might happen in your life.

As a theatre culture I think we're very intolerant of age, and longevity. We are so into the new, the now, the buzz - the young. We are very intolerant of experience and a slower pace of career progression, or different levels of career progression. Patricia Cornelius is your perfect example of somebody who's just hung in, hung in, hung in, and hung in, but there were years there where she was really in the wilderness. Right? I think we're very intolerant of that.

CreateNSW has just announced a suite of new fellowships - there's a music one, a visual arts one, a theater one. Guess which one is the only one that is for an emerging artist? Theatre. WHY? Like if you're 35 or 40, you don't need money anymore? Why is that? It doesn't make sense to me.

What happens when you're a mid-career artist? People think: you're alright, you're there, you're working - but you still need the money. You still need the support.

B: I want everyone to have fellowships but I just graduated with 10 other writers. Then there are 11 other writers graduating from NIDA and those are just the two masters courses. Like there are obviously hundreds of other writers out there who are writing amazing work. How do we talk about potentially the fact that there's just too many of us?

9:57 AM AUDIENCE AND COMMUNITY

A: Does it come back to audience. Is there enough audiences? How do you grow the audience, and for more companies?

C: Our audience is growing each year.

D: The audience is not finite.

E: And we're in a rapidly growing city. Melbourne is exploding in terms of population.

D: I think it's also like what is your responsibility as an artist in terms of cultivating your audience? Like what, what are you doing as a person, as an individual, to take responsibility for who you're making it work for. We talk about community outreach and community engagement and there's always that category in grant applications asking about marketing strategy. Who are you making this work for and how are you going about engaging them? We've become habituated to ticking boxes saying I make my work for everyone, but not genuinely interrogating who you're making that work for.

If push comes to shove, you should be able to say 'actually this is the type of person that I want to be speaking to.' So then - Great. Which community organisations can you go and talk to about inviting that community to your work? And I think this comes back to empowering writers. Writers are communicators. So what would it mean for writers to feel a empowered enough to go and approach people to engage with their ideas? We often frame the director as the boss, but I actually think that writers have a huge capacity to do that.

Because it's their job to communicate. Like that's, that's the bottom line.

Identify a community for yourself and go about building those relationships.

F: We have an interest in community production at the moment working with a team of South Sudanese actors. Today we'll have an audience of today about 25 to 30 South Sudanese community members. One of the young actors in the team, he said, can you come to an event next week in Dandenong?

There's a youth group that's interested, having seen our work in writing a play and they'd like to talk with us about how do we put together a script.

This process has been going for two years, but we're now starting to see the flow coming out of that. The team now talk about themselves as actors, and its reaching out to their community.

G: In Thailand, theatre is mostly for the middle class. But we work as a movement, a network, supporting each other, trying to build up the theatre world together. So that theatre isn't just for the middle class.

So there are more and more theatre groups emerging in Thailand, not just in the city. You go out to the countryside, you reach new audiences, your create an audience.

But we also support each other beyond the theatre-making.

In Thailand there's no government support at all. And somehow when we come back to Australia where there is government support, it feels like there's less time. We have a paid ensemble, but it's still so hard to get everyone together.

We're in a First World country! Why is it so hard? It's because in Thailand we're a network, we're a movement. We move together.

Maybe our expectations are different here, but I'm really still getting used to it.

E: What is it that bonds that movement together? I love that way of characterising it. It's so powerful in the context of this question of a strong playwriting culture. If its not money, then what are the kinds of economies that bind it together or make it a movement?

F: It's a love of art, and a political commitment. So it comes into politics in the region because this history of military role, monarchies and so on controlling things.

In Hong Kong at the moment, there's a lot of actors who are out on the streets with the protest movement. They see their work as part of a democratic struggle.

Most of our network in Thailand is part of that, in Burma and so on. So that becomes a point that connects people. But within that, there's a passion for the art, for theatre making, for performing. And also because there's a lot of politics around gender as well, and theatre is a safe space. It's certainly a refuge as well, in the region. So that's also another factor.

H: And it takes in terms of the economy that young people are in the moment. It takes a lot of labor to keep a country like Australia so rich. We're relying

on people having to really extend themselves. That lack of time is really interesting to note. Certainly nobody I know has any spare time.

F: It seems a paradox but it's very real and I think it's that the gap in wealth here is starting to really feed into every aspect of culture.

E: I'm trying to connect that back to the pub environment, the connectivity there, knowing the people you were making for, having shared values, networks to draw on.

10:14 AM WINE AND PASTA

A: I was at at the ceremony for the Silver Gull Awards, where they get a group of actors to read the finalist's plays, and the winning playwright afterward said "that was great. It's the first time I've heard my play read." And one of the actors who was there went - what?

And she's like, 'well, yeah, because, I mean - how, what, where?'

And so he went 'this is nuts. I'm gonna change this.' And the next day we started a Facebook group that we now administered together called 'Read My Play', which is basically just: come to my kitchen, read my play, I need five people next Monday, and people put their hands up. It's great. It's wine and pasta, or whatever you want to provide. And within a week we had 150 members.

B: There are so many easy ways to do get people together and make a space to talk about work with your peers.

A: Not in a way that's hoping for praise - its more casual when you're all in the industry together and on a level playing field. When its open to the public it can bring up different challenges,

C: Actors are so hungry to do reads. Even when it's not finished. It can help you finish the play, when the actors see what's underneath it.

D: Half a play is so full of potential. Obviously you learn a lot by writing the other half, but beginnings of plays are exciting.

E: The first half is always easier to write.

F: You've got to be a bit punk about it. If you start doing it, people will come. You've gotta work out the model, but don't get blinded by the lights of it needing to be perfect. You'll get the model right by doing it.

We live in a world obsessed with the image of things, and things needing to be polished. When

G: Dinner and a Show was an initiative we ran together. It is what it says on the label - it was for early stage drafting. People would get in touch with us,

and we'd organise readers and scripts. We'd cook dinner for everyone, read the play together, and talk about it.

And this was really an effort at forging this community: formalising the relationships that already exist, and exploring what the ritual of a shared meal does to conversation, and to seed new collaborations.

It's about the writer meeting potential collaborators during that early writing phase, so that they're less isolated. But also creating the opportunity for potential collaborators to be engaged in the idea conception phase of work, and to have ten imaginations feeding in, instead of just one.

It was such a simple mechanism, and it went a long way in terms of relationships that have formed out of that. We ran it as a two-year program. In the first year it was fairly ad hoc month by month, but in the second year we wanted the writers to support each other. So we programmed it quarterly, and stipulated that the writers had to attend each other's readings. They develop a language together. And there are multiple examples of people discovering each other, realising they're simpatico, and going off to make work together. Because it's at the early stages it's easy to spark up strong connections.

F: And because it's not outcome driven. It's purely and simply about the relationship. We know the play is incomplete. You're immune to failure. There's nothing to be lost.

10:28 AM SEEING THE PLAY AS INCOMPLETE

A: I'm stuck on this word incomplete. We talk about a work not being complete until it reaches its audience. But then from see working at a major theatre company, I've noticed that people also like being part of a work that might go elsewhere. When you get up and make that speech before a preview saying 'we're still working on it, something might go wrong, we might have to stop the show' people's heads tilt slightly.

B: There's a special buzz in previews.

C: People love that

A: If you tell them its complete then they'll say 'no, its not perfect, its got problems'. If all theatre could be framed as incomplete, would that change something?

D: Theatre is a liminal space, its constantly in transition. We also conflate taste and craft when we talk about work. We describe something as terrible, when its actually because we just don't enjoy that type of thing.

E: Sarah Ruhl says that's why kids make the best critics - because they can separate taste and craft.¹

F: I've noticed that my visual art friends have a different way of seeing theatre. They're much more interested in mistakes, more tolerant of things being abstract, and less likely to see things as not properly finished. They take things a bit more on a material level, because that's their practice. They appreciate that the artist put things together texturally, and they take it for what it is. Whereas my theatre friends are much more likely to rate it or evaluate it.

G: We don't do Hamlet in its 'complete' form. We edit the heck out of it.

We need to appreciate ambition rather than perfection, and get audiences to see things in that way too.

It's also reminding the audience that a play is not a commodity. It's live, and people made it. People also get stuck in this paradigm of value for money.

[We then talk about the foyer space, whether you should talk critically in foyers, or wait until you leave the venue and get in your car before criticising, using that time to stay in the experience of the work.]

D: I feel like the thing that's missing in a lot of foyers is space for reflection. Reflecting as a group. I'm involved in Scribe, a live art writing project, where members of the audience can work with the scribe. And the only thing the scribe is allowed to ask is "What was your experience of this event?" And so the person just talks, and the scribe just documents what they're hearing and then all their documents are collected together as an archive. And it's been interesting working on this project for about four years now, watching people who return to Scribe as a training of reflection that is really absent from a lot foyers. It's a critique based response, about what it made me think about, but also what it did to my body.

Its another way of dealing with the openness of a play. Maybe that's another word instead of incompleteness: openness. It's live and it's ongoing. And it actually continues outside of the theatre. It has a residue.

E: But also: people will respond to the play in the way they want to. Retraining your general public audience isn't really feasible - my Mum will speak directly after a show as if she's in a cinema.

F: And getting that foyer feedback, particular in the preview period, is crucial for me.

¹ From Sarah Ruhl's '100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children, and Theater'

[We then talk about the politics of getting feedback - from people you trust, people you don't. From your parents, or from other actors, and what to do with it.]

10:47 AM PROGRAMS ARE UNSTABLE

A: There is so much instability in the industry, with programs that come and go. I find that it fuels my fear of failure, when I don't know how something works or if its right for me or if my play is ready. And then its gone. And another thing appears.

Small and Loud is probably a good example of something that has stuck around and gained support, and become an known thing in the community.

B: I wonder if part of the success of Small and Loud is that from the very beginning it had simple, flexible, publicly available framework or ethos . It had a working methodology: this is early stage work. You come, if you're an audience member then you're present for the work. There's a chance for feedback in multiple ways.

And its publicly available, so as an audience member you know the framework you're entering into.

C: It's interesting to talk about end dates and relate to relation to those initiatives as well to kind of go: 'we're going to do this for three years and that's it.' So to run it for three years is a success rather than a failure.

And by putting an end date on it, you'd hope that people know the time pressure is there, and they need to invest in it now and make it amazing, rather than waiting to be convinced of it.

And then when it ends, they start to imagine the next thing.

[We then talk about 13P, the joint initiative of 13 mid-career playwrights who worked together to produce one play by each of them, and then dissolve. You can read about this initiative via their archive at 13P.org]

D: It means you all have to improve your skills in the area and not so good at. But then at the end they stopped. And what I think is really great about that is that it has inbuilt failure. And the best thing about that is that you don't have this kind of institutional length that then breeds a kind of silo mentality, holding onto resources.

And of course there are the bigger institutions that have this longevity, but with this we all have a shared responsibility to take it on. Be the cheerleader, champion someone else's work, create space to enable each other.

- C: You'll also understand the ecology a lot more if you try to run one of these things. You'll see the work and the context with much greater understanding.
- D: And never assume it needs to be someone more established or experienced. Build in the idea that you'll fuck it up along the way.
- A: We also had to recognize the cyclical nature of it. We ran out of writers, or we were supporting the same writers again and again, so we decided to end it. With Small and Loud we made sure we could hand it on - it's an initiative for emerging artists, so we wanted it to be run by emerging artists.
- D: Movement also creates openings - tiny openings where new people can enter the space.
- A: We're also talking about pathways, and there being more stepping stones and opportunities, for projects and artists at every level and every stage of a project's development.

I think currently there's quite a small pool of people who are willing to create those opportunities in the sector. I think if those opportunities are going to happen, it's going to require people to make them. Particularly in the indie space. It's the same on an individual level - nobody's going to know you exist until you do something. You can't wait by the phone.

- D: Also, know that in theatre there is no clear defined pathway. That you make your own paths away. Sometimes it's backwards.

11:02 AM BARTER SYSTEMS

- A: I also fantasise about the possibility of some sort of partnership with training institutions. Approaching VCA to set up a program with their second years, perhaps, and working with them on new writing. It's about a barter economy of sorts, working out what you need and what the students would get in return. That's how we did it with Arts Centre Melbourne, and they were able to offer us money to hand on to our artists, and use the infrastructure of The Channel. What do you have to offer, and who has what you want, and how can you work together?
- B: This whole space is kind of run on barter systems. Siteworks itself. People have offices here, and there's an exchange going on. So there's a steel worker who works here, who helped set up the handrails. There's a graphic designer who uses it as their office but then they also do some of the graphic design for Siteworks.

But with theatre we're talking a lot more about people and people's time in different ways though. And there's something about theatre that is, you know, is quite analogue. We all need to be in the same room at the same

time for the same hours. Otherwise the thing doesn't work. And if its unpaid time, that's even harder to line up.

11:08 AM THE WIDER CULTURAL IMPERATIVE

A: There is a kind of wider cultural imperative question. We can look to other cultures and see that for those cultures that playwriting key way of crystallizing conversation around a particular moment. And we see it in high school that kids go and study 'A View From The Bridge' or whatever, and certainly for many Americans there is an imperative to find the next way to focus that culture. Similarly in Britain, whether it's the new Shakespeare or the new Caryl Churchill - Who is that person? And there are lots of companies looking to drive that question. That then communicates to a wider thing about 'what do we think is important in our culture' and 'who are the voices of that culture? Whether we disagree with it as reductive thing, but it's nevertheless something that animates a lot of cultures.

B: But doesn't that obsession with finding the next big thing create a kind of Messiah complex where you try and find the next great playwright, and that might be at odds with the building a stronger playwriting culture?

C: I've seen it be kind of dangerous for young writers to be feeling the pressure to speak for all of their multiple identities - 'I have to speak about Australia, and capture everything.' But we all know that good writing is usually specific, which makes it universal. And I've certainly put myself in a position of expecting myself to be everything to everyone, everything to everyone. In a way I'm proud that we don't have one great genius writer, but a huge body of diverse playwrights instead. And if we could maintain a culture where no one is being elevated to the top (because who wants to be at the top anyway? Like what a horrible pressure... Maybe.) I don't know if being THE Australian playwright has necessarily done great things for say David Williamson or Joanna Murray Smith. I wonder if a better strategy is to actively say that we're not doing a Great Australian Playwright - we want to privilege diversity over having just five famous playwrights that everyone knows and thinks are great.

A: Well it's an interesting question. When Denmark were looking to revamp their funding model around cinema, instead of giving lots of little tiny bits to people, they went "Forget that. We're going to give all the money to three people." Which is problematic obviously, but it's an interesting model nevertheless, and Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg come out of that."

It can also lead to people writing plays not set anywhere, that lose their specificity in order to be viable internationally. But it lost that sense of grit or texture, which is what makes plays amazing.

11:18 AM PUBLISHING

A: The new plays that come out of MTC or Malthouse or STC. Where are they on our bookshelves?

B: I tell you why because people don't buy them. They're not in bookshops generally. And even those that are don't even sell. Even our best selling plays only sell if they're on the syllabus for schools or universities.

A: Is it also a case of build a culture, build demand?

B: No. I'd love to say yes, but I don't know how you get the public to buy playscripts. I don't know that they do that anywhere in the world. Do they?

C: It's hard to read a play. They're not taught to do it, they're not used to it.

[From here we spoke more about the work of different publishing companies - Australian Plays, Currency Press, Playlab. We also spoke about the work of different theatre companies that publish their new plays as a matter of course, such as Griffin and Red Stitch.]

D: At Currency Press, we actually see part of our remit as growing the Canon. That is actually one of our KPIs if ya like. We decide it's a responsibility to have these particular scripts published and available as a matter of record. And sometimes those decisions don't really work out so great, and you'll have a thousand copies of a particular script sitting in the warehouse. We all liked the play, but it's not really selling. That's how it goes.

We have awesome plays that come into currency press that we can't publish because there may not be the market. We have a full time marketing person, you know that there is a limited audience, and we're a for-profit organization.

11:34 AM PLAYWRIGHT AS CULTURAL COMMENTATOR

A: How do playwrights become cultural commentators? How does a playwright grow to a status when you go 'that's the person we've got to talk to right now to understand what's going on'. Nakkiah Lui comes too mind as someone who is in the public eye, and Van Badham. They've elevated their voices across many mediums I suppose, but, there's something about Nakkiah's work getting to that point where she's speaking to our culture and our country as a whole in a way that no one was doing and - therefore her career really escalated.

B: Her social commentary and her work are inseparable, and so its constant. But some playwrights are only vocal when they've got a play on.

A: I'm interested in following writers in other forms who are cultural commentators, or people who have a strong public presence, and how those two things work together. I'm thinking about novelists or poets like Maxine Beneba Clarke. I follow her on twitter, I read her poems in the paper, and then I buy her books. How much does having a public presence of your voice

on social media or mainstream media then elevate the more niche work of writing plays?

- C: Also political commentary versus kind of cultural commentary or social commentary. Shakespeare remains a famous playwright because he talked about what it was to live. Some people go to that work because they want to understand what it is to live or what it is to be human.
- D: I'm very curious that the playwrights we've mentioned who are playwrights who have a politick. Unlike, say, David Williamson who has no politick. It's a luxury to be able to practice your craft just for the sake of writing, whereas for Van, Maxine, Nakkiah, the act of writing is fundamentally a political act. Those things *have* to work together, it's not optional.
- E: David Williamson would say he does have a politick. He comes from a place of rage. Whether it succeeds or not, he sees himself as doing the same thing he was doing in the 70s. He's speaking up against injustice, though it might look different to how other writers do it.
- F: Even works that might seem quite benign, still have, I think, a politick in them. And I think that the very fact that they're taking the space and they're saying what they're saying, even if it's really in line with the kind of greater community, so we all think it's safe - that's still saying something. Do you know what I mean?

11:51 AM COMMERCIAL VIABILITY AND FILM AS A MEANS OF DISTRIBUTION

- A: Theater has a problem of scale. Of scalability and commerciality. One of the comments was you need physical bodies in a space at the same time, and there's a natural boundary to what the potential is of that. So as someone who runs a technology company, something that I've been thinking about recently a lot is - is it possible to have a for-profit production company in Australia? Is that possible?
- B: There's the historical dimension to this that in the 1900s it was the biggest way to bring people together. If you wanted to make money, you should go work in entertainment. With cinema that changed, and now with the internet that's changing again. And there are commercial companies in Australia that do that certain kind of work that makes a profit.
- A: But I'm not entirely convinced that you need huge production value on filmed works for it to be something that can market. I think it's conceivable that you could get things on Netflix that are filmed versions of plays.
- B: Well, interestingly, Audible, which is owned by Amazon, are commissioning plays that are being recorded. With podcasts being so popular then that's a way of monetizing that.

C: I never see a film version as an accurate representation of the show, more a gesture.

A: The recording point kind of goes to what I'm interested in, but what I'm primarily interested in is scalability. The most obvious way of thinking about scalability with theatre is to point a camera on it and film it. The people in this room might say it's an inferior version of experiencing it, even compared to reading it.

My key question is you look at things like underground cinema or certain artistic exhibitions that blow up, or Banksy. It relates to the question before of how is the play evolving and how do we account for the spectrum?

D: Why is scalability interesting to you? Is it purely about economics?

A: Um, sustainability. And also impact - scale has impact. If you can make a creative work and a room full of 30 people think it's mind blowing, then fantastic. But if you can have a million people thinking it's mind blowing, then that's even better.

E: But that's a different kind of impact though. And I think that measure of success should be problematised as not the only type of success. Large scale success is great, and one element of a playwriting culture, but the 30 people in a room for a two-night season also contributes to a playwriting culture in a different way.

A: I guess that's just about like fundamental values and you know, underlying drives and motivations that different people have. To me it's hard to think about scalability a written work or a devised work that is put on by physical humans a physical venue for a number of nights. That has a really strong structural boundary around what it can achieve, and will lead to conversations ongoing ad infinitum about why we're not making any money.

F: Well, for me, the thing that makes theatre what it is is that it's temporal. So to try to make it last is to abandon it altogether.

A: The way the music industry has been restructured (I'm not an expert on this by any stretch) in the last 10 to 15 years is really interesting. It's gone from a focus on sales of records, to giving music out for free and then charging people to come see the live shows. And live shows have had a massive increase, both in ticket pricing and in number of people willing to open their wallets and come along. So no one makes money from recorded works.

G: The algorithms of digital platforms have led to a lot of niche artists and musicians who've been around for a long time have suddenly got this huge new audience.

A: By accepting the expensiveness of theatre, you're reducing the number of people, like the amount of the market that's able to access it.

H: To come back to the question of how do we build a stronger playwriting culture, I don't know that trying to reach a bigger market actually builds a stronger playwriting culture.

J: It builds a wider audience, but that's different to a playwriting culture.

H: And I think for companies when you're playing into that economy, then they can be competing things. Supporting playwrights and supporting a playwriting culture can come up against wanting to reach more people. I'd love to think that those two things are fundamentally intertwined.

12:09 AM AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT, MARKETING & TRANSPARENCY

A: It's interesting with music with music because audiences going to a concert get to share that live experience with something that they already have personal experience with.

So the question with theatre is how do we create that seepage, so part of a play or a playwrights voice or a company's work can be accessed by people before they shell out their \$40 - \$80 - \$120. How do people fall in love with your work before they buy a ticket to the full show? I paid a lot of money for Hamilton tickets, but I'd fallen in love with the music before I went. It was super expensive, but it was a no-brainer that I would go.

B: Is that the job of the marketing team?

A: Well no, I don't see it that way. My philosophy on that, as someone who hires marketing people, is that marketing doesn't sell anything. Marketing articulates a value proposition and promulgates that. So if your hamburgers aren't tasty, you can spend McDonalds' marketing spend, but you would just be pouring money into a leaky bucket. The product and the value proposition of that product is what sells, and the marketing team and the people that you hire to try and tell people.

C: I hear that conversation kicked around a lot - that marketing will fix it. We'll do this risky thing or this confronting thing and we don't quite know what it is yet - but marketing will fix it! That's their job! But in practice it doesn't get you very far.

And there's only so many times an audience will come back when they keep getting burned. They stop trusting the company that misleads them.

D: So we need more marketing that acknowledges that risk and that uncertainty. How do you leave enough space to say 'we don't know what that thing is'.

E: Right. We're not selling perfection.

C: And some spaces and or artists or whatever, you know, you can build an audience that is more ready for your failures. So it has context for your failures. They appreciate the ambition of that that thing you tried to do that bombs. They go "I get what you're about. And I get why you're showing me this... Mess."

F: I remember a couple of years ago I heard, I heard Angharad Wynne-Jones talk about her programming policy at us house, which was that the biggest change that she made when she started there was working with her artists, did think of the artist-audience relationship within a research paradigm so that actually they seed ideas and they commissioned work and work with the artists from the ground up so that they can speak to their audiences as knowledgeably as possible about the work that's being created, and be as open and transparent as possible so that the audience feels empowered to be a co-investigator of what the artist is investigating.

And so that actually that also speaks to this kind of like the idea of incompleteness because it means this show that is produced is the first step in an ongoing research project. Either because the show is going to be done again and it has evolved or because the next work that that artist produces is the next step in that practice.

G: And that's not dissimilar to the Royal Court's approach. It backs away from the preciousness that often surrounds a new work where everybody's got their fingers, and everyone's terrified about it failing and losing us money. But what you're doing is thinking about a much longer term proposition, you're in on our investigation. We're all in this together because we want the work to be better.

H: It's almost like that's... consciously creating a healthy culture!

[Big Laughs]

12:19 AM OFF OFF BROADWAY

A: We don't have an Off Off Broadway.

B: The 'missing middle'.

C: Why don't the big companies like MTC or Malthouse work with regional theatres to test out new work? You go and see the new work down at Geelong or Frankston, you see it cheaper, and it gives the more work chance to grow.

D: Being at showcase Victoria this year, there's this whole network of regional theatres that are programming work for their audiences, and most of the programs I looked through weren't featuring the kind of artists who were making theatre in Melbourne. Not exclusively. Circus, cabaret, Children's shows. Children's theatre sells across the state incredibly well. So maybe its

about starting genuine conversations with this extraordinary network of regional venues, some are as close as the outer suburbs of Melbourne. I was talking to one person who programs in Gippsland, who said "We get the same people back again and again because they keep bringing good work to us. Is it that the audience for our work isn't out in those areas, or that we haven't done the work of speaking to them? Regional Arts Victoria does incredible work in that regard.

C: Is it the playwright's responsibility to do that kind of work? We don't all have those producing skills. Shouldn't the bigger companies be doing this?

E: Well maybe its not all on you to do it, but there's only so many of us doing this, so if you want that thing to be built then maybe its on you to at least start that process.

F: The other problem in regards to not having an Off Off Broadway is that we don't have a Broadway either.

12:26 AM SANDWICHES, AND HOW AN AUDIENCE IS NOT JUST A MARKET

A: I'm going to do a couple of things while we continue the conversation. One is I'm going to get a sandwich, cause a whole bunch of sandwiches have just arrived in the room. There's a vegetarian sandwich, there's chicken, there's ham. Just help yourselves. There's fruit juice, there's an ice tea kind of thing going on here.

[Hubbub as people start getting up, moving around, getting sandwiches]

I'm also going to talk about the red couches and encouraged people to come and sit up here just to kind of focus the conversation a little bit. So if anyone wants to join up here, um, it'd be amazing.

B: I'll come join you, Mark!

A: Thank you! So how do you think we might build a stronger playwriting?

B: One of the things that came up earlier was the interchangeable use of the word 'market' and 'audience'. Which I think is actually really dangerous because it implies that the audience is just there for us to make money from. Which means that you're going to market to people who have money. Whereas increasingly I want to make work for queer people who don't necessarily have a lot of money. So I want to find out ways that they can be in my show, regardless of their financial input to my life. It's not necessarily a financial exchange for me. It's an emotional exchange. It's a creative, intellectual exchange. And so I think it's dangerous to just use those words interchangeably.

- C: I think it also speaks to then why and how you make it work. You're more likely to make work that fits into already existing models or existing forms, and not experiment with your own craft in a way that might be more appropriate to the work and the stories you want to tell.
- B: And I've been in situations before where I've been talking to companies about work that I've been making, and even without any commitment to them commissioning or producing the work I start changing the nature of my work to suit that audience, in a way that doesn't suit my audience and doesn't suit me and my interests and why I make work. And then the work is compromised in the end result, whether or not they buy it. And so my answer to that is to have a day job, because I don't want to work under commission. And maybe that's about me, that I'm not capable of keeping my work and those expectations separate.
- A: But companies would also go to your work because they want your audience. You're having a conversation with an audience in a deeper way, and a company wanting to commission you would want you to keep that depth in your work, while also bringing it to their own audience too.
- B: You don't want to just make the work for people who have financial means. And then if you go into a company, it's harder for you to take your audience with you and like, what does that mean? If you're like abandoning your audience in order to get paid.

[We discuss the example of Slave Play by Jeremy O. Harris, and the work the playwright did to ensure that \$30 tickets are widely available so that this Broadway show is accessible to all.]

- B: If you're an independent artist going into a major company model, you're the person bringing all of the fucking art, but you're somehow made to feel like you've got to be incredibly grateful that someone's letting you make art. So you are already picking your battles about what you're going to fight for in that context.
- A: I think we as an industry struggle around development or accessing new communities because we don't quite know how to do the many steps of research and the whole of company approach that's need to bring a new community into a company.

[We reference the study that Deakin University undertook around audience development in AsiaTOPA 2017, the steps required, and the ways in which organisations succeed or fail to reach new audiences. The study is called Asia TOPA: the impact of Asia TOPA on the Victorian cultural sector: collaboration and capacity building.]

[We then spoke about various productions (independent and mainstage) that had held community nights, with comp tickets or cheap tickets, or organising a bus

service to help people get to the theatre, and other strategies for ensuring that a particular community gets to see a show]

- B: I used to think that I wanted to make theatre to change the minds of people who are different to me. But then I realised - No. I just want to make theatre to embolden the people who are similar to me. I'm not really interested in like converting people.
- C: And there's a different energy when you can bring your community into the theatre.
- A: And in other auditoriums you've got people who don't usually take over a specific theatre being in a majority, and then the regular audience having to negotiate that.
- B: And the thing about having your audience filled with people who understand the experience on the stage, is that the people who don't understand it can feel in the room that other people get it. And so they're kind of like, Oh, maybe just cause I don't get, it doesn't mean it's invalid. Whereas like when you've got your audience full of people who can't relate to the experience on stage, it's very easy to just write it off and decide "This person doesn't know what they're doing."
- D: I think is a profound thing for you to observe that there are places you want to work or places you don't. Because it's often younger artists want to do everything, and see every audience as the same, when of course it's not.
- B: I mean it definitely has happened the hard way. I'm communicating something that feels universal to me, and other people wouldn't get it at all, like I'm speaking another language.
- E: I wonder- in terms of this massive question about how to build a stronger playwriting culture - I wonder if it's about this discovery of the relationship between building your relationship with your audience and finding a specificity of voice.

12:49 PM PICNICS

- A: I'm interested in this question of 'how to build a strong playwriting culture' because I feel like a playwriting culture can often be categorized around two major theatre companies in Melbourne. And those playwrights don't generally interact with each other day to day, they all have separate individual engagements with the companies. So I'm interested in how we build a stronger playwriting culture around the other companies and independent hubs. How do you build those up as centers of great work? Because I feel like we're watching some of them companies struggle at the moment?

B: I don't actually think about the companies when I - I don't think about any companies I think about just all the playwrights that are my friends and how we all like see each other and support each other and go to each other's shows and like read each other's scripts. I guess I'm using culture and community interchangeably, which is why I've got a different take on the place to start then.

C: Today is a start, isn't it? It's these low-key sorts of events. We did one of these up in Sydney - I was in the office talking to another playwright about how outraged we were about Australian Plays and Playwriting Australia, and I said "We need a picnic!"

And it wasn't huge, I'll be honest, but its just about ways to connect, isn't it? Everyone we knew invited everyone they knew, and lots of people couldn't come, but it's just to say: we are connected.

D: And it's true to say that playwrights are not in competition with each other.

C: That's right! We're not! I've been having this conversation -

D: For actors, with all respect, for most roles there are half a dozen other actors who could play that role. But for playwrights your voice is so distinctive.

C: I was having this conversation with a newly graduating playwright who was avoiding opening nights because he didn't like the whole Industry thing. But I don't feel too confronted by the industry. And my comment to him was, actually, I've found the industry by far more supportive than the opposite.

The world is a competition, its capitalism, but there's so much strength and solidarity to be found from our peers. Even in the tiny acts.

E: In my experience of the literature world, it does feel a lot less competitive than the theatre world. Every theatre can only put on a limited amount of plays, but with publishing it doesn't feel like the opportunities are so plainly finite.

And because of the circuit of writers festivals there are regular spaces for the community to come together around the country.

F: There seems to be lots of small engagements, ways in which writers are connected, activated. We get to hear from them, and the interrelationship between their public presence and their work.

E: Yeah - and we were talking before about whether you're a brand or a public figure as a writer. And you do have to do that touring and promotion side of things.

- F: Is that kind of thing possible in theatre, or are we in fundamentally different ecologies?
- E: I think it definitely is - because you write the book, and then you have to go around talking about the book and everything around it.
- F: But can playwriting be about talking about the play?
- E: It can, I suppose. Writers Festivals haven't really taken on playwriting as a form. Marieke Hardy started programming playwrights and readings in the Melbourne Writers Festival in recent years, and there was a lot of backlash, saying 'that's not writing!'

We did Blak & Bright - six plays with Ilbjerri, and then again we did five plays with La Mama. And people were much more accepting because there is that understanding because theatre is such a bigger part of Indigenous arts practice than perhaps in literature.

- F: Do you think it's a space of cross over that's going to grow?
- E: I think so. It's all storytelling. And many writers are crossing over, and we shouldn't be stuck.

1:02 PM WRITING ACROSS FORMS

- A: I think that would build a stronger playwriting culture. If play writing wasn't so strictly defined. We talked about the flexibility of roles in the form, but we are also talking about the number of writers now who are writing across other forms. It shouldn't be an existential dilemma. Working in other forms can expand your skills, spread your voice to new audiences, and feed back into your playwriting practice.
- B: I read this observation the other day - If you write a really good book, the likelihood is that your book published. If it's a really good book. You might have to work at it for ages, to get people to see it. Whereas if you write a really good play, it's really just not that likely that someone will pay for you to put it up.
- C: Yeah, I agree. I think that's a bit of a truism unfortunately.
- B: So let's all just write books?
- C: Well - not exclusively. Do it to support your writing practice. Even in the UK where they've got much bigger audiences, that's what they tell their playwrights generally. Work in TV, work in these other mediums. What can you learn from each of them? I've done a TV animation - 13 minutes - and I learned so much writing that.

- B: The different approaches can be challenging, but having access to multiple different approaches to work can be really valuable.
- D: And by discovering the differences in the new form, it can show you what's distinctive about the other.
- B: Yeah - TV writing is so technical. Which definitely makes me excited about how flexible play writing is. I come back and I think: yes! I get to do whatever I want again!
- C: But then again, Netflix and all of those other kinds of things is opening up the potential innovation in TV writing. It's definitely more innovative, certainly more than film.
- A: I had someone say to me recently, who was wanting to write for theatre: "You can say things here that you can't say anywhere else." I think they had just seen Blackie Blackie Brown, and said there was a license to say things here that you couldn't say in TV or in some other artforms. They were seeing the potential. So I think there's a back and forth between the two worlds - It's not necessarily the one which has more jobs or more money is not necessarily going to consume an artist.
- B: The content can be much more wild, but so can the form. I've never really understood naturalism cause I'm like, 'why would you do that, when you could do ANYTHING? Literally - ANYTHING!
- And maybe that's why theatre doesn't fit comfortably into a commercial model in the way that other forms do, but yeah - you can break all the rules.
- A: But there's such a risk with that license of being able to do anything in this black box. Sometimes I watch theatre and they've really leaned into that license. Like "Whoa! You've been in here too long!"
- You can do anything... but, you know, maybe you shouldn't...

[Crowd Laughs]

1:08 PM THE SHIFTING MEDIUM

- A: We have a massive cognitive bias. Thinking about its extensive history and its multicultural nature, it's only really been for the last 80 years in a maybe two and a half thousand year history that we take it for granted that this certain image of theatre is what we need to strive for. Verisimilitude, naturalism. Modern actor training emerged at the same time as the field of psychology emerged, so now we waste hours of rehearsal with everyone's pop psychological approach to things. It's helpful sometimes, for actors, but that's the frame we're routinely putting around things - and is that useful necessarily.

And then psychologist has been through four major shifts in the past hundred years, so we shouldn't be relying on it as a stable thing that should inform our practice as theatre makers. You have that open license, and there's so much you can gain access to right now that you could be drawing on.

- B: I think the expectations from TV and film have filtered into how audiences come to see theatre. It's like definitely difficult to challenge. The tone and style needs to have some relationship to what people are consuming in TV and film.
- C: But I think to your point about online platforms opening up the form of television, and people starting to experiment beyond naturalism in television. Experiment with form, experiment with content. Maybe that means that there will be more of a middle ground between experimentation in theatre and experimentation in film and TV.
- D: And can I just throw one little tiny other provocation in? We all expect the a play to be 60+ minutes long or whatever. Why can't we see an evening that's got a 10 minute play, a 20 minute play, and a 45 minute play curated together. TV's doing that a little bit now - not everything is the same length anymore. I'd love to go and see 10 minute play by a new writer coupled with a 45min play, or something like that.
- E: Music does that with gigs, right? Each band brings their audience, in some ways. It's programmed around a headline act, but it's a similar kind of model. It also opens the possibility of not being so 'perfect' per se, that they sit together in an interesting way to create whole night.
- F: Like in cinema where you used to have 'the short' at the beginning

[We discuss Red Line Productions 'New Fitz' program. They received funding to enable ten writers to each create a forty minute play, writing in response to the main stage production, and running on the set of that production. It was commented that audiences generally didn't see both shows on one night, but that this is a different model to the one proposed above.]

- A: One thing I feel really lucky about working in this medium is that we have the audience right there. We have that ability to put it up there and get that immediate response.
- B: I think that's such an interesting idea what you proposed. Especially if the works or somehow created in relation with each other, rather than just putting them together arbitrarily. You could have an emerging artist being mentored by an established artist, and then both of them made something, so that there's already a kind of exchange between the two of them. I think that would be fascinating to see those works, that chemistry between them.

1:16 PM DEVELOPING A SHARED VALUE FRAMEWORK

A: I think a strong playwriting culture needs a shared value framework. How do we create a shared value framework for theatre?

In my experience of creating spaces and bringing people together there's always an element of self-interest at play. It's enlightened self-interest, but there's always a moment where a lot of people seem to go 'I can't see the direct benefit to me, and so I'm not going to engage'. And that always happens. But I wonder if it's about building this enlightened self-interest into what this culture might be. So for example, instead of having a diffuse "let's meet up", we might reframe it by saying that the foundational value of this working culture is reciprocity. I can offer this, you can offer me that, and we're going to exchange those things and we can each move a step down whatever parts were going down.

I think it's good to recognise this self-interest that is at play, and then it's about advocating for the fact that everyone's interests are going to be progressed by working together.

With this rapidly decreasing institutional support, reciprocity is probably one of the key ways forward. As these formal structures seem to be shutting down, the onus is unfortunately on us to build our own.

Showing up to do something for someone else may not directly benefit you, but it's going to come back to you down the line. And, emotionally speaking, you're going to have a network to rely upon and you're not going to feel like you're left out in the cold.

The other part of that which is worth remembering is institutions do not start as institutions, they started grass roots. Griffin Theatre was built by people buying bricks.

B: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

C: It's worth also nothing that when communities become institutions, there's a fundamental change. And actually what we need is to recognise that institutional power, unless it can articulate and defend itself, is not defensible. What's really beautiful, what's nourishing is community, and collectivity, and being good to each other. Something to keep in mind is that the language of bureaucracy and the language of institutions are barriers to genuine community engagement.

We might joke about the idea of picnics solving everything... but actually the picnic will solve everything. And the more we go to the picnic, the less that we stress about institution, and build our own kind of communities through picnics (or whatever the picnic is). I mean that's what is is -that's creating an alternative set of relationships so that we're not dependent on

economic relationships which are driving us all insane and killing the theatre culture.

- D: There's limited resources at every level of the industry. It's something we've been looking at recently. We were putting such a focus on doing the work and getting the work done and aligning all of our resources - money, energy, all of that - to making shows, we weren't doing enough to invest in the health of the organisation and the community that we're a part of. We weren't having enough picnics. I really want to champion the role of picnics.
- B: The thing about picnics is - everyone brings their own sandwiches. They really don't cost any money.
- E: The picnic also shouldn't be about putting on the production. The picnic itself is important. It's very easy to get locked into the vision of the only successful endpoint of being part of the theatre community is that your show is seen. Well, yes, we'd all love to make a show at some point, but if we're not having the picnics just for the sake of bringing a plate and helping and talking and sharing, then where's the foundation for that? Where's the stuff that holds it together that we then build a show on or a community of shows on?
- B: It does also take away the pressure of networking at opening nights, and the economic burden of going to see everybody's shows in order to know what's going on.

1:22 PM VALUE OF PROCESS OVER PRODUCT

- A: I heard some artists speaking recently about the work they're currently making. And the deep community work they were doing - it was incredible, really, the processes they were undertaking. And then they're coming up to having to produce the show, and receiving all the funding rejections, and realizing they're not going to get the money they need to do the show. We've all experienced this, and it's awful.

And someone said - if you don't put the show itself on, then the cultural engagement itself is the show. That's the outcome, and it's so good.

And that made me think that if every show didn't go on, and the value of the process was the value of the work, then so many works would have no value. Because the process is so disregarded in the way that we make work, and often so violent and awful. People have horrible experiences just so that they can put on the show.

If we start thinking about process and what you're putting into the world in terms of the people that you're working with, or the people that you're researching, or all that sort of stuff. If that's just as valuable as the work... that would totally change things. You don't want to be creating horrible

experiences from people or um, or not doing due process in terms of how you engage with people that the work pertains to.

1:25 PM PICNICS WITH THE AUDIENCE

A: Thinking about picnics. But more in terms of audience engagement, and this has to do with money. But I'm thinking about the audience that is invited to picnics most in this city and that's the MTC audience. And they LOVE their picnics.

B: Wait - what are the picnics in this context?

[Crowd laughs, acknowledging that we are deep in this metaphor.]

A: Q&A's, events, anything outside of the show, which makes them feel good. And MTC do that heaps and they do it really well.

That's a community - an audience community - and a community that's taken really good care of. (And we can argue about all the different reasons for why that's possible.) But I think that's something positive to think about in terms of what institutions can achieve.

C: Whatever you think about Trump, one of the ways he spoke to his audience was with love. The people who aren't in the room - he want's them to die - but compared to Hillary he spoke a very different kind of way. I mean, I don't want be Trump in any analogy, but -

A: But maybe you could be Scott Morrison -

C: Oh Thanks. *[Laughs]*

A: But no, I think there's a really key thing here - that Bill Shorten campaigned on an identity politics that was separated from economics. And as a result he lost the entire base. And so I feel -

C: But it's a thing we've talked about a couple of times - continuing to work with your audience, who they are, showing them how things get made, and how crucial they are in that ongoing conversation. They love the picnic.

A: And it makes them feel good and it strengthens their community. And that sounds like a healthy fucking playwriting culture. In some way.

1:28 PM GEOGRAPHY AND THE NATIONAL PLAYWRITING CULTURE

A: Can I ask question about the geography of Australia? I'm originally from the UK and it seems to me that for playwrights in the UK there's an easier movement between the cultural centres (London, Manchester, wherever). There's two of us here from Sydney, but I'm assuming pretty much everyone else here is Melbourne based. I'm wondering whether you all feel connected

to playwriting culture in other cities across Australia? Or whether when we talk about playwriting culture, do we really mean the *Melbourne* playwriting culture, the *Sydney* playwriting culture? What do we actually mean, and how do we improve those connections? Because it's expensive and hard and time consuming.

B: It really washes out in my mind when I think about the national playwriting culture. And I guess that's just my experience of it. Going to national conferences like the National Play Festival and the Australian Theatre Forum, it feels like we can be talking about different contexts.

It's not *not* connected. Everything's connected. But like it just feels like in order to build a stronger playwriting culture, my mind has a better ability to see that happening when I think about Melbourne as a starting point. Working locally, and then spreading it out - to Victoria and then to the nation. I think that person to person approach is the only way I know how to build a culture.

C: I think we do have particular geographical challenges in terms of expense. In Ireland everyone just tours everywhere because the country is so tiny. You can have a national audience and have a peer network and have relationships with all the theaters around the whole country. That's so much harder here. I go to Sydney and I know no one.

A: I suppose what I'm asking is - is it important to try and bridge that? Are there other ways to breach that problem? Are there other ways to connect to make that cultural bond? Or isn't it important? Is it, you know, is it enough to focus on a city-based culture?

B: I guess, thinking about a bridge, and the structure of a bridge, it has two pylons in either end. Right? And I feel like I haven't seen that around a playwriting culture, substantial pylons in each major city. The festival was trying to bridge a national conversation, but nevertheless it always felt so Sydney-centric as an organisation.

D: They used to have reps in every city, but that hasn't existed in the last seven years or so.

A: This was one of the questions in the recent Review Paper - Is a national body important?

B: I think it is important - but it can't be the only body. And this was my feedback to that question. It can't be the be-all and end-all of the conversation, trying to create and reflect the entire national conversation. There needs to be state based or city based organisations as well. And it's noticeable that when Playwriting Australia disappears from the landscape, it feels like there's suddenly nothing.

A: Do Melbourne playwrights think about getting their plays on in Sydney?

C: The Fringe festivals feel like they can give you mobility. You do one, and you can do them all.

B: And they've actually set up a lot of mechanisms to make that happen - the Tour Ready program, various Fringe Awards, etc. They've done things to build and activate a network, and now its just a visible network in everyone's mind.

E: If you wanna talk about pathways, I think Fringe is a really interesting place to look at. They've accumulated so many mechanisms over the years.

B: I mean the initiative that they just put out around a playwriting commission is interesting. And it is essentially just a small grant to make a show, you've still gotta produce it off your own back, but they centred it around playwriting and they used the word playwriting.

The Fringe model works well for a certain kind of self-producing solo artist, but I wonder what it takes to actually make it a place where playwriting happens, and where you talk about the new plays that are going on.

E: I think Trades Hall will be very interesting to watch as it becomes embedded. I think they're moving into a really interesting phase. And they're starting to really mix formal and informal structures.

1:39 PM MAKING REGIONALLY

A: To the previous question about getting your show on in Sydney - its less about that specific audience, and more about just wanting your show to have an ongoing life. And especially if you're fortunate enough to have got funding for the work, you want to have something to show for it, and go beyond 10 performances. It's three years of your life and you want to make the most of it.

B: I think that's why for me regional engagement is really interesting. I'm from country Victoria, and so that's where I want to take my work. And so a lot of my opportunities and some of my best audiences have been from going back to the places I've come from. You get farmers come to see work you made at Fringe, and they're interested. The audiences are there. It's not just Melbourne and Sydney.

And once you kind of make connections with a couple of them, they all talk. Once you book one or two then you can usually get five, six. And then next thing you know, your show has like a whole whole life that you didn't know what possible.

C: And the appetite is extraordinary. I've run a directing workshop in Bairnsdale, with a bunch of 60 year olds, and it was extraordinary to me. They were telling me about how they love musicals, all this classic stuff. They love 'Thoroughly Modern Millie' (which I then found out was quite

racist). But then I introduced them to Michael Gow's *Away*, and they'd never heard of it. But they fell in love with it. It was them on the page. And it needed no explanation - it was just exposure that was needed.

A: I think that Thoroughly Modern Millie point is an important point though. I grew up in a really small regional town as well, and the regional performing arts centre in the next town across, and that's how I got into theatre. Bell Shakespeare came out and ran an award and that was an important moment in me finding my way into the performing arts, and a big important part of my growth as young person.

But also I came out after leaving the country. And I make deeply queer work, about queer people and gender queer people and trans people. And I haven't really even considered putting theatre on out there in the areas I grew up in because that's not safe. And the same can be said for people of colour as well. And so I think it's totally right that we should all be considering regional areas for touring, but also like - it's so much more complex than that.

I'm just trying to add a layer of complication to the conversation because I think it's important. But then maybe baby closeted queer me would've died (of joy) seeing my own show. Maybe it would've helped to me to come out. But at what cost to the performers of the work, going into that context?

B: I do see that starting to shift in the regions. My local theater company doing a production of the Laramie Project when all they usually do is *Mama Mia*. I liked that I can see things starting to shift, even if it is taking a lot longer.

D: And I guess that's the choice of an artist, to decide: I see that audience, and I want to speak to that audience. I get them on some level, and I want to add, I want to change them. Or I want to inject queer work for the baby queers in the country.

C: And you weigh that up against the risk. Yeah.

A: And I think it's about finding that sweet spot between finding something that the audience can engage with, where you're also pushing them.

1:49 PM POLITICAL MUSCLE

A: I am struck by the absence of political muscle in our sector. Clearly there's a reliance on funding, but politicians and prime ministers will drive over you if you don't have any strength. If you're waiting for them to lighten up before you start criticising them - that's not going to happen. But what we do have is these extraordinary stories from people who've been exposed to theatre and have been transformed by it.

That ability to tell human stories is our strength. We do it better than they do in TV and film because it's immediate. That's why theatre is so important. The stories we tell are the stories of everybody in this country

and they are stories that matter. And if we're not pushing that point politically then we are wasting that massive advantage that we have (compared to everyone else). If we start to harness that, then we can think about - what do we do? What is the Australian voice, what is our voice in terms of a political message? In terms of a human message? And how do we tell that in London and New York and Berlin, Dublin and everywhere else?

When things do go well overseas we don't seem to own those successes as a culture. We see it as them doing well over there, but we don't seem to own it. But we're so poorly funded, we don't have time to imagine these possibilities. But they're there.

B: I've got a friend who is in a position of cultural leadership. She's running a company, with partial funding. She's paid, but because they're understaffed and because they've had to take on a lot of different projects in order to fund the company, she's always just dealing with the immediate problem. So she doesn't have the time to sit down and think about how they could better organize themselves or how they could change the model and the structure in order to be healthy or more supporting of artists. And often one leader after the next will cycle through these positions in these companies, and so there's no space for them to dream of anything other than repeating the model.

A: It's the same in health and social justice. Everyone's funded on the smell of an oily rag. They're in survival mode, and they're just thinking about the next funding round or some form of capacity building if possible. I speak to those groups and they have no money. And there's absolutely zero advocacy budget for anything at all. But there are a number of people, like me, who have an understanding of how you make stuff happen politically.

You apply pressure. And we're actually in such a great spot to do it - we have editors that are friendly with us. Some of the people in philanthropy who come to fund our institutions have a lot of interest and a lot of power. They just don't know what to do, and no one's ever approached them in that way. The grassroots connections we have are actually extraordinary, they'd be the envy of other grassroots movements.

C: I'll add to that. NAVA, the national association for visual arts, who are doing a really great job at the moment in terms of mounting a political campaign. Esther Anatolitis is taking a campaign literally into parliament. Taking groups of artists in there and sitting politicians down. One thing I found interesting is that every time a politician goes into parliament, they actually get to buy a visual art work for that office. So every single time a political decision is getting made, an artist's work is in that office. And when you look at the walls of the offices and talk to the curator - the types of artworks they've chosen do not necessarily align with the political agenda. So it's kind of a way of sneaking ideas into the offices.

D: In Victoria the Governor is making quite an effort to see a lot of theatre, and Martin Foley also sees a lot of theatre. But unfortunately for independents it's AMPAG who's doing that - they go to parliament and make sure that sector is protected. Perhaps it's a roll for Theatre Network Australia, in terms of being an advocacy body. And MEAA - a kind of union approach to that.

[We spoke about different ways government think about value or measure their own work]

D: And it's hard in the Arts because we get stuck on the rocks of 'intrinsic' v 'instrumental' value. That a sausage sizzle for a soccer club will involve more community than a season of a play.

Go down to Parliament house and see those how many other idiots like you are there, in suits waiting around those corridors. There are always industry bodies, trying to get the money that you want. And what are the arts doing? Waiting for them to turn up, or waiting for the phone call. But it's not going to happen if you're not on the front foot, actually trying to steer that conversation.

All of those people are in there, and they can present a very clear case around why they should be funded. Us arty types are saying it's really important to your soul... but what's the basis of that?

E: We have a pretty promising Victorian government that has a strong belief in the Arts. They have an arts policy, they have a creative state strategy, and they believe that the arts have a vital role to play. And I'm trying to work at how do I get playwriting more strongly in that agenda? Because I think other parts of the arts are maybe getting more of the benefits than we are.

D: This is kind of what we were talking about before. It's a dangerous road, sure, but playwriting can be a voice to our cultural moment. We study *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* because of the way it speaks to a time in Australian history and identity with real insight and power. In other cultures their great plays are a real currency.

E: My belief is that playwriting can say more than other artforms, it can bring an exceptional level of insight that painting or poetry can't. Of course that's controversial, but it's my belief, and it's why I'm here and why I'm in this industry. But I have to argue that case.

A: It's about what kind of difference can you make strategically at wherever the pressure point is. Daniel Andrews is interested in the arts - how do you get them to things that are interesting that aren't necessarily our major institutions.

F: These questions of measuring success continually come back. Theatre can have soul-shattering effect, but how do you measure that?

[One of the speakers talks about their use of Culture Counts, a cloud-based software platform used to evaluate the impact of a wide range of arts and cultural activities. The system captures feedback from audience members, expert peers, artists and education groups about their experience in a simple and cost-effective way. Through consultation with the arts sector they have developed a set of metrics that describe the quality of arts programming as well as important social and cultural outcomes.]

[Questions were raised about the politics of data collection and analysis - who decides the values, and the narrative used to interpret them.]

D: We're not really trying to distort the data or hoodwink anyone. It's actually getting the company itself, more than anything else, to think about an aesthetic response to work from different perspectives.

It's the dramaturg's dilemma - if it's a hit, you had nothing to do with it. If it's a failure, it's all your fault.

A: You just give them a nudge and you provide them an opportunity to say "I'm so glad we fund that". Our audience - politicians, the media, and all the rest - is just as important as the ones who come and see our stuff. Who is our whole audience? How do we tell the community that it's important there is a theatre in their city? Give people ownership of the possible is important.

Take your sense of what's possible to places that don't have a voice. That's something we can do. It costs a lot more in terms of imagination than in terms of technical bits and bobs. Then you can write about it and speak about it, and take that to a minister. That's how you start to build up the case for why we're important. Then you can invite them to see the further possibilities of working with you.

And then you say, imagine what would happen if we were actually complaining about you guys, what was happening. We turned our attention to something else and start talking about issues cause we did we talk about school.

F: I think the invitation is a massive mechanism in this process. Making people feel welcome. And it's about inviting people to share a vision with you.

E: And also share the rewards with you. And you don't just have to get the Minister in there to watch your play for them to get the impact of it.

F: There are these shows in our shared cultural imagination that we all know about even if we never saw them ourselves. But they're spoken about. We tell stories about shows that we ourselves never saw - that's quite amazing.

E: How many of us saw Who's Afraid of the Working Class?

[Someone raises a hand].

One person?

F: Yeah, exactly.

It's quite a potent thing to be able to understand that the trace can live for a long time.

E: And to bring people into that trace. We drop the ball on that sometimes - putting all of that energy into making a great show, but not actually then communicating that back to the people who gave you support along the way.

That's the evaluative phase of the project. If you're talking about making a work for a specific audience and want it to have an impact, then the evaluation phases is probably the most vital.

G: The thing I find challenging is that in trying to fund the development of a work, you're expected to be articulating that as you go, but you're also still discovering what your work is. The idea of creative development is to discover.

F: That's the amazing thing about formative evaluation is that if you build evaluative mechanisms into your development process, then there's a way for it to evolve with what you're discovering. You can build in mechanisms to keep checking back in and let that evolve with you.

2:25 PM QUEENSLAND PREMIER'S DRAMA AWARD

A: 221 applications. Who knew there's 221 people writing new work? And then I think they interviewed 14 others, and then then they choose three works to develop over six months. And then one of those works is in the Queensland Theatre season the following year.

B: 221 people applied for it. That's crazy. But It's the one thing in the country that you can apply for and you can get your play on. There's no other way that you can get your play on just by sending it into a competition. Everywhere else its all these weird conversations that might lead to something that might lead to probably nothing. But this is a direct line. And that's why its intensely competitive, but it's got a sense of linearity that I think there is nowhere else in the country.

A: And it can be a work in development - it doesn't have to be a finished work.

B: Phillip Parsons is now split among five people, but they still have to deliver five scripts at the end of the year. So you're being commissioned for a full work for a fifth of the fee. Five grand. Ain't it great?

2:30 PM EDUCATION & ACCESS POINTS

- A: Is PWA something we should talk about?
- B: Maybe? We've been talking for five hours, and it did come up in the first ten minutes, but then...
- A: I thought their smoke bomb as they walked out of the room was that they 'fixed it'.
- C: 'We've achieved our purpose. We've solved sexism'
- A: 'and racism and ableism...'
- D: It would be interesting to talk about what we need from it or what we think is missing
- B: I've been thinking a lot about access points a lot lately, about education. Who gets to go through training institutions and who doesn't. And generally how people enter the scene. What are the entry points that bring people into the scene?
- C: Education as an access points is really interesting. And for those who can't access those formal courses, how else do people connect to the community? Some people don't realise it's something they can do, so outreach is important. Thinking about Small & Loud and those other spaces where people help each other learn. How can we work together to make participation and education more accessible?

[Some of the VCA Playwriting students in the room spoke about their experiences - their journey into the course, and what being part of the institution and the peer network meant to them.]

- E: There's not that emphasis on the well-made play. And the lecturers may not be an expert in what you're interested in, but they can introduce you to people who are and help you locate your practice.
- F: It makes the industry more accessible. The hierarchy of institutions is necessary, but they help you navigate it.
- G: The sense of community was really important to me. I'd done so much writing but I'd never shown it to anyone. I didn't have the courage, I didn't think it was possible, I didn't know how to ask for support.

I got used to banging my head against a wall and thinking that this is an endurance. 'This is about how much can I take?'

So that experience of being with all those people, and being held was really powerful.

Raimondo said in the first class: 'I can't teach you how to write like someone else, but I can teach you how to write like you. Your voice is the only voice you have, and the only voice that matters.' That's an amazing thing to be told in the first class of a ten month process. I love the idea of being able to give that back to people.

My great fear now is that I'll forget some of this stuff. So to be able to refresh that as much as possible with as many people as possible feels like an extraordinary thing to be able to do.

B: How do we stop you forgetting that stuff?

But also how do we capture this thing that you're articulating - that it feels like banging your head against the wall, and I just think that's endurance, and I just think that's what I have to do.

And I'm hearing like the majority of the room nodding and absolutely recognizing what you are saying and the power of feeling held. That to me feels like a key to a strong playwriting culture.

How do keep that alive?

G: It comes from that notion that we're not alone. Whether it's a sense of purpose at the top? Or its a hub and spoke thing? Or we all share our contact details at the end of this day, and that we make sure that we keep in touch with each other essentially. There's nothing wrong with asking for help. There are no stupid questions.

Writers have to support each other because there's not enough of us anyway. Someone else's success is our success, because it means that what we do is valid, and its important, and people cherish it. We will be part of helping somebody get to the next stage.

The culture of VCA this year has been to nurture each other. The lecturers nurture each other and nudge is in the right direction, but we have to show up for each other.

We have to ask questions of each other and be honest in what we write and how we respond to each other. Realizing that that is stuff that we can do.

H: The set up of the writers room was really important to me. I wonder if we can foster more of a culture of writers writing together.

[We spoke about writing alongside each other, and then other ideas of sharing work with each other, and learning to give feedback, and helping each other.]

A: The crucial thing about these sorts of structures is building a common language.

You do also need to think about facilitation, even if the facilitator role is shared around group. And that there's a shared democratic attitude to how knowledge is distributed or developed.

G: I think it's important to think about how to help people write scenes, not plays. Because a play can be too much, but the crafting of a scene is much more manageable and fundamental.

H: I'm being mentored this year, and it's been the most incredible experience. And I was always hesitant to send her my rough drafts, always delaying sending anything because it was too rough. But she would say 'yes - that's the point.' And she has this tremendous ability to always see the potential, not the mess. She could see where I was trying to go.

B: And daring you to go there.

A: That's why the Writers Army works, because the presence of other people working hard makes you knuckle down as well. Practice for me is the accountability to other people.

J: The historical context is that at the start of the 20th Century we had the rise of the director, and the writer began to be decentred from the theatre-making process. So now writers sit outside the buildings, and get seen as trouble-makers. But of course, as we know, writers are deep thinkers.

[Some boxes of delicious cakes arrive, thanks to Melbourne City of Literature. The group is grateful.]

[We speak about the Royal Court podcast and how empowering it is hearing a range of writers talking in depth about their personal experiences of writing.]

We also talk about the different pathways and levels of access people seem to have had, and particularly how white men have such smooth inviting paths to these dream opportunities.]

3:11 PM ARTIST AS PRODUCER

A: It's kind of clear from some of the conversation in this room that playwriting is not just about playwriting. There's so many other layers and things that you have to critically and creatively engage with in order to make a viable career for yourself. You need to grapple with economic systems, and grant systems, how you deal with audience, and how to be as punk or true to your politics on those fronts as you are in the plays you write. You can't just write the play, you have to engage on many levels.

B: If it weren't a question of time and money.

- A: Next Wave really frames the artist as a producer. You were talking before about the Kickstart Intensives, the discussions there. And how for many projects the process become so inherent to the project.
- B: And that the value of the process can be so much an important part of the work itself. And if you don't end up being able to put the work on if the process has had value then that's amazing as well.
- C: We always want to push our craft and practice forward, and try new things. But experimenting with craft is a luxury for a lot of marginalised artists. There's an expectation placed upon you to just 'deliver the narrative' in order to get the grants. So I'm like, one: in what ways is the current way of working devaluing process? Or in what ways, in the way that we work, do we glorify the output regardless of how shitty the process might have been? And is the work still of value - artistically, socially, culturally, politically - if the process didn't match?

And yes - If it wasn't about eating and sleeping and bills we would all make really brave work. But is the scaled down oily rag version of the work... is that a sustainable model of working? Well - the season is happening! The show's going up whether you're in or not. Or do you reflect the reality and let that come out.

- B: I've worked a bit with Darebin Arts at Northcote Town Hall and they to announce seasons late in the day so that you can pull out if you don't get funding. Which I think is cool, because the show doesn't have to go on, I guess. I haven't pulled a show out yet, but I think that option should be there. If the show goes on - but at what cost to the people putting it on - then what is the value of the show?

3:16 PM DITCHING THE BLACK BOX

- A: Would ditching the black box help to improve playwriting culture? I think of it a lot in relation to the white box gallery for visual artists - that it shoe-horns you into a very particular type of making work.
- B: And a particular budget
- C: And a particular audience. If you put work on in other spaces then it opens you up to other audiences.
- A: I also think about the role that scenography plays in the way we experience art. If you present art in alternate rough-n-ready spaces, like on a pontoon for example, then your audience is already having a great time - they're on a pontoon!

[Laughs]

It's a thought about infrastructure, urban environments and city building. If you change the infrastructure then you can change the way audiences experience work and the way artists make work.

And this is happening, with the overhaul Creative Victoria's doing. It's happening right now in the arts precinct.

Theatre making is fundamentally tied to architecture.

D: It went from a ritual - a thing that people experienced over days -

E: - and to which everyone went

D: - to something scalable and marketable. How many people can be crammed in so we can make a shitload of money?

And then to a rejection of that, which gets you to the black box, when we said "I don't want all that". And then Brecht's theatre was part of that, exposing all the artifice.

To reject size, to go for something intimate. But its sad that that intimate project, in search of something more like life. The naturalistic project. Which is now seen as thoroughly bankrupt.

But the cost of changing the architecture of one of these theatres is colossal.

A: At Testing Grounds we've always aimed to be a multidisciplinary space, but the theatre community hasn't really taken it up much at all. It's noisy, its partly outdoors, but while its not a black box theatre its still a free performance space in the Arts Precinct. Why not just change the style or find a new approach? I know its not that simple, to just change your practice, but its interesting.

F: If you don't have all the design elements you just have the performers and the text. And that's not a bad thing, right?

D: When I was at Sydney Theatre Company we changed the artform development part of the company. So instead of what was seen as pretty design heavy, was then stripped back to being no props, no set, just actors and audience. And I remember two boys got into a fight over it - a fistfight in the foyer about design versus writing. It was lame, but kinda funny, the conflict between wanting to control over every second of the visceral elements of the experience, versus the notion that theatre is fundamentally aleatory so we should be able to deal with it.

G: How does the audience feel about that?

D: For this particular project it didn't matter, but at MTC we'll get letters of complaint.

F: People want to see their money going into the costumes, don't they!

H: I read an essay on little galleries - shopfront windows, stairwells and nooks which are now becoming legitimate galleries. Which is fine in terms of decentering the major institutions or spaces where great art happens. But they were also pushing back against the sense that art is fine in the shadows and doesn't deserve a legitimate space. These are the pragmatic reality, but we're also kowtowing to those pressures.

Blackbirds have been doing work in alternative spaces, for example, in Sydney and down here. And I make an effort to go to their opening nights because one: they're predominantly POC, predominantly women of colour. And because they aren't your usual theatre demographic, much younger, people go via Coles, they bring snacks with them. You hear the Coke opening in the theatre, you've got phones out, you've got cheering. It's a live space. And by those markers you learn that the theatre isn't a silent space where people talk at you.

A: Testing Grounds lends itself to a certain type of work. But my opinion and my experience of seeing audiences in that space is that audience don't *really* care about anything. They will have a good time whatever the situation is, as long as you're taking care of them. If they're comfortable, they've got a nice drink...

It's all about induction. Inducting the audience into the space. Playwrights do that in their writing - inducting an audience into your way of theatre. Is a play just an hour-and-a-half induction? So we can create these spaces for playwrights to make work in - just change the induction process.

J: It's like I need someone to just go in and like run a lab, showing basic ways in which to make theatre in a site that feels like it's not very theatre inclusive. It feels like it's going to be too noisy, too cold, it's concrete, it's in sheds (and not in a cool way). Like it feels hard. You need to get some, you know, designers or the kind of right inventive theatre makers to come down and go, this is how you do plays here. Or this is how the tools of theatre or the skills of theatre makers can come in and engage with this kind of space. I feel like the induction in a way hasn't happened enough with theatre makers. It's not just 'do whatever you want'. It's kind of 'here's how to stop doing'. Or this is how people have done it before. You have to learn how a space works.

K: But I think it's writing for spaces too. I've been told various times by various people that you need to think about what space you're writing for. Though often I don't, because it all relates to where I think I might be able to access.

The other point is that in most professional theatre companies use mics now. I guess its for a level of intimacy, having the voices feel really close to the audience's ear. And then Testing Grounds being so fundamentally loud - the noise conditions would change everything. So It's a very specific space you'd be writing for.

A: White cube galleries are the PDF of the art world. They're a global neutral - if you can put it on there you can put it on all around the world. Site-specific work is incredibly volatile

J: I want to circle back to our question. Does taking on new spaces and new audiences - is that how we'll build a stronger playwriting culture?

L: Passing on info about found spaces or cheaper spaces might be useful. So artists learn what spaces are good to use, and then the spaces themselves get better be at working with artists.

3:32 PM HAVING AN ARTS PRECINCT

A: Is an arts precinct a good or a bad thing for a city? To put all the institutions into one area?

B: The Collingwood Arts Precinct has sucked all the Artist Run Initiatives off the streets and put them into one building.

C: When you look at the Arts Precinct its not really a precinct, it's a series of organisations sat next each other. But for the people working there, there's no sense of community like you get here at Siteworks. It's amazing how closely a whole bunch of arts workers can work next to each other that have no have no real connectivity and definitely. Those connecting points between the people who are there are also the points where people enter.

D: An arts precinct concentrates everything. But because the amount of people being processed expands, then bureaucracy becomes the best way to manage them. And then the independent artists fall into that too - they are processed via bureaucracy.
And the same happens in smaller burrows too, that art gets funnelled through one controlled access point.

E: So then if you want to just make something happen, it becomes almost impossible to do that.

B: The Arts Precinct isn't designed for artists. Development Victoria says flat out that it's for tourists, not for artists.

F: And as a student at the VCA it was very good for my soul. Feeling that you're in that community, finding your community, is amazing.

- G: There's something that happens at Malthouse - when you walk through there, you get the sense that there are so many projects being planned, running into people and seeing students and everyone down there.
- H: So its then a question of who's not accessing it, if VCA is your main gateway as an emerging artist. There's something to be said about how we expand that network out. You don't have to go to VCA art.
- B: The redesign of the VCA campus is about opening it up. The design was physically inward facing, so the idea of ripping the guts out and breaking down those walls is allowing other people to pass through, making the environment more porous.

3:45 PM SYDNEY

- A: For the Sydney folk here - what's happening up there?
- B: Production-wise independent theatre is trying to meet main stage expectations with indie theatre budgets and indie theatre time constraints. And they're somewhat succeeding, but I don't think it's helpful. There's not as much new work. I think we're heading into our sixth production of *A View From The Bridge*.

There are some avenues - Phillip Parsons, Patrick White Award, Griffin Award.

A lot more playwrights are diversifying into screen, where you can try get paid. Screen seems to have more towards craft-development.

Precinct-wise we're in a bit of flux because The Wharf is under construction, which has spread everyone out. And I'm not sure if the companies have adapted for it yet.

STC haven't partnered with any of the other venues around the city, so they're just at the Ros Packer and The Opera House. And that's heavily contributing to the shows they're programming. They're renting out Fox Studios, which has a financial impact, but it also means they aren't able to give the in-kind support they used to sometimes be able to give. Sydney Dance Company, ATYP, have both had to move as well.

It's spread geographically, but its not that where they've landed has then really been activated in anyway.

Belvoir have been running their 25A program for 3 years now, giving you venue, box office and rehearsal space, but asking you to cap your budget at \$1500 (of your money). They're trying to address the fact that indie theatre is scrambling to look expensive, leaving artists with nothing.

C: The other knock-on effect with ATYP performing at Griffin means there's a lot less space for Griffin Indie. There are programs of scratch nights and cabaret, but not straight plays.

City of Sydney just recently support a pop-up venue called Fringe HQ, which happened for Fringe, but then City of Sydney kept it going. It's cheap, so its accessible, but its crappy, which can be fine. It's not curated in any way - its really just a venue for hire.

Kings X Theatre has been going for a few years, and they've got a couple more levels now, and they're curated.

There's really very few places to make work.

A: And where do playwrights sit within that?

B: I think that playwrights are struggling.

C: King X Theatre are still getting swamped with applications, and that's for self-funded shows in expensive space. It's very very competitive.

And it does feel like a reduction in opportunities for new work.

The Ensemble have actually programmed a surprisingly new-work-heavy season. But in the independent sector is essentially young companies doing the latest Pulitzer Prize-winning play.

The Eternity Playhouse are quite an interesting model. They're run by Darlinghurst Theatre. They ask for applications from theatre makers, but then they fund the production. So they're programming in a ground-up model, rather than Artistic Director-down.

Every city goes in cycles, and I do feel like we're at the bottom of one right now.

B: Even readings - we aren't even just doing readings anymore.

[They discuss the Storytellers Festival, curated by Joanna Erskine at Kings X Theatre]

D: It was a great opportunity to workshop the play and explore the play, hear it out loud. Of course, it depends what you want to get out of it.

C: A friend and I started a facebook group called "Read My Play" which has gotten quite big now. And it was just that - come and read my play at my house.

E: That's where we're at right now.

C: And that's with no audience. But you could.
But public play-readings tend to be more inward looking.

4:03 PM THE WE IS US

A: How do we build a stronger playwriting culture?

B: Do you mean what's within our control or out of our control? Like how companies talk to each other - we can't control that.

A: The 'we' in this question is about us. The 'we' is everyone.

4:05 PM NOT JUST PLAYWRIGHTS

A: It's not just playwrights who need to answer this question.

4:07 PM SUSTAINABILITY

A: Sustainability is the key one for me. I produce my work independently, but I can only really afford to do one a year.

4:09 PM CONNECTING

A: Maybe it's a matter of connecting with other playwrights, sharing skills, or offering support even if you're not an expert. Budgeting, contracting, marketing, all that stuff. We're all skilling up, but we shouldn't have to be doing them all ourselves, and all on our own.

B: And so many of those skills are easier to learn if you're not doing them on your own project. I did this a few years ago - I just went to someone and said "can I produce your show?" And I could see it so clearly - I can see what it is, how to market it, I can see how to articulate it and I understand why it's so hard for you.

And even simple tasks like opening night invites. I can write them and send them, because I know for you as the playwright trying to write invites to your own show is tied up with so many other anxieties and voices of doubt. But from the outside, it's like "Get some confidence! Invite them!"

A: Yeah, I can champion the SHIT out of someone else's shows!

B: We can be very strong champions of other people's work.

C: But then you also have to recognise that there's an inbuilt end-point to those things. They're not very sustainable. They won't be around for a hugely long time and nor should they be.
We've been talking a lot about failure, and I wrote myself a note: We don't talk about a flower as having failed for having gone through its lifecycle. It grew, it flowered, it died - that's what they're supposed to do.

We need to reframe it.

Is it a failure, or did it just reach its endpoint?

It has to be a renewable thing.

- B: And a strong playwriting culture might not be made of permanent institutions. It might be made of these two-or-three-year initiatives.
- C: Fail hard fail early? And then maybe even the successful ones need to fail too so something new can form?
- D: Cedrick Price talks about that - having the seeds of destruction built in from the start. It actually means you can burn brighter, haemorrhage money, and then when it crashes you say it did what it supposed to.
- E: You want to make sure you maintaining something of value within that, so the seed is passed on. When Playbox ended, it was a huge problem, because the company that was entirely new Australian writing was then seen to collapse. It poisoned the brand. When it failed, it signalled to everyone else that new writing is dangerous. And not in a good way - the idea was poisoned.

So in this idea of a project dying every two years, you don't want the greater project of it to die too.

- C: It's also about your measure of success - not just longevity, but mapping the impact and career pathways and interconnectivity between artists that your initiative has enabled.

4:21 PM GIVING

- A: In Sydney if you're rich you buy a boat. In Melbourne in your rich you support a gallery or a theatre or a dance company.
- B: I want to talk about something we've touch on around helping each other. And I get a lot of artists coming asking 'where's my help?' But I like to think about strategic generosity - that you give things away for free, and then you'll have a community to draw on when you do need help.

4:23 PM MANY DRAMATURGS, MANY DRAMATURGIES

- A: I was reading an essay questioning to what extent in-house dramaturgy actually helps playwriting. Whether the play comes into a company with a dramaturg attached, as opposed to whether the playwright then has to come in and have their play changed by the resident playwright. I think bringing your dramaturg with you might help diversify the work that's coming through a building. So not every play that comes through Belvoir, for example, feels like a Belvoir show.

And that comes into shifting the status of playwrights with companies too.

B: I feel similar with that around companies bringing cultural consultants onto plays when they move into production, as opposed to encouraging the playwright themselves to collaborate with people who are part of the community they're writing about. The company will just put one on person on, who can then critique the specifics of the language, but actually can't then go back and tell them to rewrite the piece and unpick the real fundamentals that are wrong.

There's a resistance to encouraging long-term collaboration within the team, which isolates the playwright further, which maintains the hierarchical structure you're talking about.

C: There's normally only one dramaturg at a company. So the choice is that person. At Malthouse they're starting to bring on different people, which is great. Though Mark and I, when working together on my play. And I remember talking a lot about this at the start - because he's a white man, and my play's about race. And we would talk about that, and it was part of our conversation, so we were both conscious of it.

But if all the dramaturgs within an organisation are a similar type of person, then that's something that needs to be spoken about and addressed when you're doing work with those companies.

A: It can give you diversity in terms of culture and identity, but also in terms of discipline.

D: That's what we looked into with the Next Stage money, is making sure that the program works for the playwrights.

Working in any room, pretty working across cultures or on Indigenous-led projects, I always feel that it's a privilege to be there. That's why chaos theory is so important in this - one of the beginning essays around chaos theory is from a weather system guy talking about any system's initial sensitivity. What you say can completely disrupt, destroy, undermine, or be completely useless to somebody else's process, and it will just continue that way. And you have to tread very carefully.

E: So is it a matter of, as you get to know someone, working out what you can bring and what you don't know?

D: It's about who invited you on the project, and then who's leading the project, and being able to spend time with them in their context. It's actually a completely different way of making, and when the time and money pressure is there, it's often the first thing that gets the chop. But then just throwing money back at it won't help either.

Next Stage puts us in a privileged position where we are actually investing in process.

- B: Who holds the responsibility for those cultural conversations? We're always working cross-culturally, but then how is that relationship being shared or managed between the playwright and the company?
- A: Often your drawing story from other people, and you've got your cultural support when you're writing the play, but the company doesn't want to bring on all those people. They want to bring on their own people, and those other people get cut out of the conversation. And the new consultant can only do the surface stuff, the specifics of language, not the bigger issues.
- D: It can also be true that actors end up carrying the can, and take that responsibility for the cultural consultation. Doing two jobs, essentially.
- A: Consulting has its limits. It's always on the terms of the inviter. Ditch one of the producers, and bring on someone from that community so they can actually have influence.
- C: I guess that's what we're talking about: who gets to tell the story? And then if you're bringing on all these consultants to validate you telling the story, it gets tricky.

It still comes back to who's lens, and who's at the centre of that story.

It seems to me that in screen, more and more, those questions are being asked pretty forensically. "Why do you have the right to tell this story at this moment and at this time?" And sometimes that's frustrating, but it also means your being interrogated about that at an early stage.

With commissions, when people come to you with this great idea, and then not realising until later down the line that it could be problematic.

- F: I was talking to Elaine Crombie during a script development recently and she was talking about the Black perspective within the work. And she was talking about her work with Actors Equity, and she was saying that 'No work should be made on this country without space for a black perspective in it, and without room for an Indigenous actor'. Which doesn't mean that everything needs to be written by Indigenous actors or directed by Indigenous directors, but that space needs to be in there.

I just thought that was an interesting way of framing it. Because there is this huge concentration of 'who's the writer and what's their identity?' - but it's more complicated than that. Sometimes it is as simple as that, and sometimes it's more complicated.

4:41 PM AFTER PLAYWRITING AUSTRALIA

A: I think you build a stronger playwriting culture by talking about it. And checking in regularly. There are ways that we already do that, but even when PWA opens up, we need to keep talking about it regularly.

B: Whatever comes out of this review and whatever new incarnation emerges, for me its about not putting all the weight on that. I don't want to be hanging around for the next big thing, or let my reaction to the next PWA model be everything.

Because there's still this. There's still what we're doing right here.

C: Have there been those conversations between companies? About how to step in and fill the gap without PWA?

D: We've been inundated by plays. We're not resourced to read unsolicited plays, but we've received a lot of scripts from increasingly anxious playwrights.

This moment may be a good opportunity to set up something that's better equipped for now.

It's not wrong to say the landscape has shifted since PWA was set up. We did the stats - about 11% of the repertoire of major companies was Australian plays, and now its much higher. And now in a very different way companies want to own playwrights from the get go - to have discovered someone.

What we need are makers who have initiative, but also who can make the most of their imagination.

Things have changed, but its obviously not solved.

C: Does anyone really think it was at its end?

B: I think the model needed to change. I thought the new AD was already looking at doing that, putting forward some pretty exciting new ideas, and asking those questions...

I don't think it was at an end, but it needed to change.

C: Because the statement the Board put out was so hands-off, like the work was done.

E: There were different levels of problems. Some of them were cultural, specific to the organisation. And I don't have the full picture by any means. But there were some internal problems, and that kinda prompted the question of 'what do we do now?'. Which then prompted the review.

C: They put the onus on the theatre companies to do that work, but I hope that a national playwriting organisation would not be so beholden to taste.

D: There was an idea of dividing that resource across the major companies towards supporting new plays, but we all know that support would just disappear.

B: There's a lot I want to do, and that I'm starting to do, but I'm also aware of the limits of major companies and the problems around the concentration of power, and who's taste is deciding what gets supported. So I'm trying to work out ways to push the boat out and make things more playwright-led.

4:49 PM WHO REPRESENTS PLAYWRIGHTS

A: I think one of the revealing comments about PWA characterising themselves as not being representative of playwrights. Which was shocking to read, but its true - they don't have a membership base. So what would that be, to be a playwright-led organisation.

B: The Australian Writers Guild have a membership base, but they don't seem to know what to do with their playwrights.

C: Why?

D: I don't know!

E: Because they engage with so few that when they get a playwright become a member or win a thing with them they don't quite know where to put you.

F: And FYI playwrights the Theatre Industry Agreement which AWG negotiated with companies has now ended. It is over. So they're not even representing you for that.

4:55 PM HOW MIGHT WE BUILD A STRONGER PLAYWRITING CULTURE?

A: How might we build a stronger playwriting culture?

B: In five minutes?

A: Yeah

B: More picnics

C: The dinner and a show thing. Is there anything like that at the moment?

A: You should run one.

C: Why not! I'll give it a shot.

B: Well that's what Liv and Jules did. They went 'that's a good idea.' 'Oh, someone hasn't done it - then we better do it.'

Don't wait for permission. Take it. Own it.

There's an energy cost, and a financial cost. The benefits outweigh that.

D: If you just start doing something, you become the governments problems, they have to do something with you. Either you're a problem, or they want buy-in.

E: The anecdote I heard about DARK MOFO was that David Walsh made MONA FOMA, and his Dad went 'yeah, sure, you made a festival in Summer in Tasmania. So what? Try making one in the middle of Winter!' So he did.

4:58 PM DATABASE

A: Having a Melbourne playwriting community formalised would help, but it takes a lot of work to be building and maintaining a database, and who's gonna do that work?

B: You don't need a database to be a culture.

A: No, but I guess we're saying how do we build a stronger one. A lot of people in the room are going, I didn't know that existed. I didn't know this existed is because they feel like they didn't have access to that. So at least PWA was an access point, you know, they listed things. I mean, I'm just talking broadly now, like, um -

MARK: It's five o'clock.

[WOO!]

MARK: We've been talking for eight hours. There's so much more to say.

B: Is that a world record?

MARK: Maybe!

We've covered a lot of ground. So for now, I want to thank everyone that participated in the conversation today, those who were here at the start, those who came throughout the day, and those who are here with us now, at the end of the day. I want to thank Arie for holding space for us and recording the conversation so it can be transcribed and compiled as a snapshot of the present moment in playwriting in Melbourne today on Wurundjeri country.

We should talk more often.

[Applause]

[End of transcript.]