RECOGNISING THE FACE OF AUSTRALIAN THEATRE: AUTHENTIC DIVERSITY AND THE CASE OF METANOIA

GLENN D'CRUZ (GDC) IN INTERVIEW WITH GÖRKEM ACAROĞLU (GA), SHANE GRANT (SG) AND GREG ULFAN (GU), FOUNDERS OF METANOIA

There is often a significant gap between the rhetoric used to promote cultural diversity and the harsh reality of living as a visibly different or culturally different Australian. Institutions, such as schools, universities, government departments and corporations often engage in a form of official 'virtue signalling' that creates the impression of embracing egalitarian values – it is now common for academics, for example, to use email signatures that announce politically correct alliances with marginalised groups. Unfortunately, these same institutions continue to engage in practices that exclude non-normative Australians from positions of influence and leadership. This

phenomenon is especially prevalent in the arts faculties and in Australian theatre studies subjects. As the entire sector reels from the devastating impact of COVID-19, it is timely to reflect on the values that we want to promote in the post-COVID-19 world and to consider how we might contribute to a more inclusive and culturally diverse theatre culture in Australia. One of the contributions which academics can make to the cultural life of the nation lies in their ability to draw attention to the work of artists and companies that fly under the radar without receiving the acknowledgement that they deserve. Metanoia, an independent theatre company founded in Melbourne, is a case in point. Established by Görkem Acaroğlu, Greg Ulfan and Shane Grant in 2013, Metanoia has consistently sought to redress the under-representation of non-Anglo writers, performers, directors and other theatre artists on Australian stages – especially with regard to flagship theatre companies. Originally located at the Mechanics Institute in Brunswick, Melbourne, the company is now based in regional Victoria and continues to explore how questions of race, ethnicity, gender identity and class play out in a variety of local and international contexts. Metanoia has built a reputation for producing innovative works that span a variety of genres, including narrative theatre, digital performance, immersive installations and live art. This interview identifies the company's major aims and achievements, with a focus on its political orientations and dramaturgical strategies. Since the word 'metanoia' refers to changes or shifts in perception, thought and action, this interview

explores the company's perspective on the problems associated with attempting to recognise the face of Australian theatre culture. I spoke to the founders of the company on Zoom on 16 October 2020. What follows is an edited transcript of that conversation.

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GDC: Let's begin with some background context. Why did you form the company?

GA: We formed the company in response to Moreland Council's call for a company to manage the Mechanics Institute in Brunswick [an inner-northern suburb of Melbourne]. Greg and I had been looking to buy a building in West Footscray, which we intended to use as a performance venue for our own theatre company. We contacted Shane when we saw the Moreland Council call and discussed how we might form a company of professional artists that would also be responsible for running the venue. The council wanted to turn the Institute, which functioned as a hall for hire, into a space for contemporary art. Most artists were unaware that the venue existed. The only reason I'd used the space in the past was for its high bandwidth Internet connection, as the show I was directing at the time required this. So, the Moreland Council's brief required us to turn the space into an attractive and more prestigious contemporary arts centre.

GDC: Much of the work that I saw at the venue seemed to promote cultural diversity. Did you have a pre-conceived vision about how you might develop a more inclusive approach to programming work in the Mechanics Institute?

GU: We wanted to develop a theatre that could accommodate each of our interests – as artists, we have our own signatures, if you will; that is, our own preferences for particular genres or styles of theatre. And while we are all committed to multiculturalism and cultural diversity, it wasn't something we put into the constitution of the company. It's something we've all been doing as an integral part of our practice. So, it went without saying that since Australia is a culturally diverse country we would reflect that diversity in our work – it's not something that we had to be encouraged to do. And we didn't do it for funding, either. We wanted to make theatre for all Australians. For me, cultural diversity is inherent in the term 'Australia'. Unfortunately, this is not true of popular or mainstream culture, which is still very Anglo-centric.

GDC: Kim Ho's 2017 report on cultural diversity in Australian theatre[1] certainly confirms your observation, Greg. He found that of the 95 productions produced at Australia's ten largest theatre companies in 2017, only four were written and directed by people of color, while 70 were both written and directed by white artists. Predictably, he concludes that people

of colour and those from non-Anglo backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the theatre sector of the arts in Australia. So, would it be fair to say that one of the things that the company attempted to do was redress this imbalance?

GA: Absolutely, but as Greg said, we live in a culturally diverse country. We live in a very diverse world – at least the three of us do. The people around us are of every shade, they speak many languages – we don't live in white enclaves, yet Australian theatre is, in many ways, one of the last bastions of white exclusivity. Just recently, I heard an Anglo theatre director say that theatre really is a white person's game. I was horrified. Really? Why didn't someone tell me that twenty-five years ago? Had I known that you had to be Anglo-Australian to succeed as a professional theatre artist in this country, I might have chosen a different career. Anyway, that is why it's important to make work that pushes against those sorts of attitudes.

GDC: But how can we account for such attitudes and the fact that Australian theatre still appears to be dragging its heels when it comes to being more inclusive of non-Anglo artists?

GU: When did the White Australia policy cease? I'm pretty sure First Peoples couldn't vote until the 1960s?

GDC: Yes, as most people know, the Australian Government held a referendum in 1967 to consider whether Aboriginal people

should become citizens with voting rights. Up until that point, First Peoples were considered part of the fauna and flora of the country. Obviously, there are historical and institutional reasons for the persistence of white privilege in our society. The first Act of the new Australian Federation was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, which inaugurated the so-called White Australia policy. The architects of the policy deliberately intended it to function as a mechanism for excluding people of colour, so our country was founded on racist principles. Successive governments gradually started to dismantle the policy from the early 1960s, I think. It wasn't until Gough Whitlam was elected as Prime Minister that it was fully abolished. Incidentally, that's the most significant condition of possibility for me being an Australian citizen [I'm a brown-skinned Anglo-Indian]. My family could not have immigrated to Australia until the early 1970s. No doubt we have seen some positive changes with regard to questions of cultural diversity over the years, but here we are today talking about the under-representation of people of colour and Indigenous people in Australian theatre. History can only tell us so much about this state of affairs. I think part of the problem has to do with the lack of leadership opportunities for non-Anglos in all sectors of society, but especially in the arts. This is certainly the view of a 2019 report, *Shifting the Balance*, produced by Diversity Arts Australia[2] that found a significant gap between

the rhetoric that supports diverse leadership in our cultural institutions and the reality of non-Anglos being in leadership roles. This is despite the high participation in the arts from people from so-called 'diverse' backgrounds.

GA: Exactly. It's also important to acknowledge the extent to which people from different ethnicities are intermixing, so it's misleading to speak of our population in terms of 'pure' racial or cultural groups. If we reflect this reality in our theatres or cinemas or on our TV screens, we'd have to start re-thinking our collective identity, and what it actually means to be Australian today.

GDC: I think Nazeem Hussain or Aamer Rahman [Australian standup comedians] once said that if you wake up in an Australian hospital staffed exclusively by white people, you'd better get out ASAP because it's not a hospital, it's a TV set. I guess we are seeing more non-white faces on TV these days, but I suspect that white people are still occupying the key creative positions. There are exceptions, of course. I'm a big fan of Paul Fenech's work. I think *Fat Pizza* and *Housos* give a more representative picture of suburban Australia, or perhaps, more correctly, those working-class suburbs that tend to be mostly under-represented in our culture.

GA: Greg was telling me that he saw a commercial the other day

and he immediately knew it was from the UK because there was a ballet dancer in it called Fatima.

GU: Yes, it's a recent campaign about how artists can find work in other industries, and therefore it got taken down. It's only a couple of days old. It shows a ballerina changing her shoes, and the caption reads that Fatima's next job could be in cyberspace. There was an immediate backlash for other reasons, but my response was that there's no way this could be from Australia. In Australia, it wouldn't be Fatima because Fatima wouldn't be considered 'experienced' enough to be a professional ballet dancer. In fact, another part of the answer to the question why there's so much white representation is because, most commonly, the response from artistic directors and directors in the mainstream is: 'well, we tried, but we just couldn't find anyone experienced enough'. For example, twenty-five years ago, I graduated from Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) as an actor, and I have worked on main stages across the country doing all sorts of spear-carrying roles, but I'm still not considered 'experienced' enough.

GDC: That's a good segue into my next question. You made the point that Metanoia didn't have an explicit policy to contest the hegemony of white culture in Australian theatre, but, rather, inclusivity was a value already embedded in the way you approached your work. In the light of what Greg has just

said about non-white artists not being seen as having enough experience to get gigs, can you talk about those instances when you have felt marginalised or believed that you haven't been given the opportunities which perhaps other people have been given, because of your ethnicity?

GU: As an actor, I have never been considered for a lead role in a mainstream production of anything, ever. I can't even get an audition for roles in mainstream productions on TV. I ended up firing my agent because she kept telling me that nobody ever asked to see me. It seems that they're always looking for cultural authenticity until, of course, they decide that non-Anglos lack experience! Colour-blind casting is a relatively new thing. I mean, Cleopatra has never been Egyptian in any mainstream show that I've seen. I guess that's colour-blind casting! Romeo and Juliet are seldom played by Italians, for example.

GDC: Let's not mention Jesus Christ.

GU: Exactly. He was a Middle Eastern Jew, yet every culture portrays him in their own image. But to get back to the point, in my experience it's as though there is a *de facto* apartheid system that operates in Australian theatre as far as casting is concerned. It's not just a question of representation, it's actually a question of equity in earning opportunities in the

industry. The likelihood of someone like me having a regular role on a mainstream TV show – like *Neighbours*, *Home and Away*, *Blue Heelers* – is next to zero. To digress a little bit, it was clear to me why I wasn't getting the work. I think I'd actually find it a lot harder to cope if I was Anglo-looking and wasn't getting the work, because it must be even tougher to be turned down if you fit the image of what they're looking for – actors, regardless of ethnic background, are underemployed. That explains why there's a lot of drug use and depression among actors, particularly younger actors. There can only be one Hugh Jackman, but there are thousands of actors – but that's another matter.

As for the apartheid situation I just mentioned, I'd like to call the ABC, the Australian Bleaching Commission! As an 'ethnic' you can be in the background. I mean, I've been a criminal, I've been a rapist, I've been all kinds of things, but I've never been the boy next door. But I can tell you now that if you live in Coburg, Brunswick or Footscray, then I am the boy next door. Of course, the assumption is that the boy next door is Anglo-Saxon – it's almost like an intentional propaganda machine. The old Soviet Union produced all sorts of propaganda designed to maintain an officially sanctioned image of the country. There's no official propaganda machine in Australia, but somehow our

cultural institutions keep spreading this myth that we live in an essentially Anglo-Saxon country.

GDC: So, if you are excluded from mainstream stages then you have to find other ways to advance your career. This means you have to look at alternative or smaller theatre companies for work, or you have to make your own opportunities – as you have with Metanoia.

GU: I formed a company with another friend of mine, Joseph Sherman, back in 2000 to work with John Bolton. Joseph has been consistently receiving 'development funding' for the last twenty years! He gets nothing more than development because he is a Sherman; I'm an Ulfan. John Bolton was not part of the company, but he directed our productions.

GA: So, you're still not experienced enough?

GU: No, I still need development funding. I'm not eligible for production funding.

GDC: Shane, what's your take on the formation of Metanoia?

SG: We began by having conversations about how our stages should reflect the streets. We certainly see a culturally diverse population when we walk around. I think, in some ways, Anglo over-representation on our stages is the result of class privilege as well. I think a lot of the theatre professionals developed

through private schools with access to those theatres and I think a lot of people see the making of art in Australia as a leisure activity. So, making theatre is not seen as a legitimate way to make a living. This attitude tends to encourage people from privileged backgrounds to make theatre and they are generally more comfortable working with people from their own cultural and class background. That's a significant factor in making Australian theatre a space for the wealthy.

GDC: That's a good point. I think you've described Melbourne Workers Theatre's *raison d'être*.[3] It's a shame that company is no longer around because it did a lot to contest white privilege in Australian theatre. Görkem, you can tell us about your experience of trying to break into the theatre industry?

GA: Yes, it is a great shame about Melbourne Workers Theatre. A great shame. We could consider MWT as a forerunner to Metanoia, as I was Artistic Director for the last phase of that company's life. I think what is described as 'unconscious bias' plays a large role in the lack of opportunities for artists from diverse backgrounds, whether they aspire to be actors or artistic directors. Of course, what I'm calling 'unconscious bias', people in the diversity community often call 'racism', but let's use the term 'unconscious bias', for the moment. I think that if you're not white or if you didn't go to the same private school as those people in the industry, then you are just not

going to be considered good enough. I came to Melbourne from Sydney to study at the VCA and, after that, I took a reasonably well-known female theatre director out for a coffee. I admired her work so I asked her for some advice. She was lovely, and she gave me lots of useful tips, but she also said, I think people are going to look at you, Görkem, and they're going to think: 'I just don't know if she can direct a mainstage production'. This person then went through all the things that people would think about me. I just thought, what do you mean? What is it about me that conveys the impression that I am not capable of being a mainstage director? I think this is one of the biggest problems we face as artists from non-Anglo backgrounds in this country. We can't change anything about ourselves because we're not actually the problem. Exclusion from the mainstream operates for all the reasons that we've mentioned so far.

A few years ago, I was having a conversation with a very eminent theatre professional, and enquired how someone I graduated with from VCA, a young male director who went to a private school, managed to get a prestigious gig straight out of VCA, directing a famous actor, without any professional experience at the time. I'd had professional experience in Sydney before coming to study at VCA, as did other people in my year, yet this person got a high-status directing gig

straight out of VCA. I asked about the application process. This person said, 'well, he was just in the right place at the right time'. I realised that even if I was in the right place at the right time, I wouldn't be perceived as someone who could direct such a …

GDC: Did you just say 'the white place at the right time'?

GA: Exactly, white place at the right time.

GDC: I think we now have a good sense of the experiences that motivated you to form Metanoia. Before we go on to discuss the work produced by the company, can you speak a little bit about the company's name. Why Metanoia?

SG: It has a number of meanings. The one that particularly strikes me is that it refers to the change of state between going into and coming out of madness, but there are other meanings as well. I've just given you the word's meaning in clinical psychology.

GA: The definition I like refers to self-reflexivity and transformation. It's a Greek word. Here it gets pronounced incorrectly. It's actually pronounced Mutanya.

GU: I like the meaning of it as a reflection of self, as in seeing the self in an image. So, in a sense, that's theatre. That's the function of theatre: to allow people to be self-reflexive and

see themselves in the image, as well being on the verge of madness.

GDC: Can each of you speak about the specific interests you have as theatre-makers? You obviously have very different aesthetic preferences when it comes to the kinds of theatre that you make. My impression, reflecting on the company's work from the outside, is that Metanoia's output is very eclectic. It has produced canonical modernist plays such as *The Dumb Waiter* by Pinter and postdramatic, installation work such as Milk Bars. So, aesthetic diversity is one of the group's distinctive features.

GU: My preference is for the classical form of linear narrative that makes a clear delineation between performers and spectators. That's not to say I always favour realism or naturalism, but I prefer works that have a beginning, middle and an end. But, yes, the company makes all kinds of work. I'm happy to be involved in the making of performance art, or installation work, but it's not my passion, it's not my preference. I prefer to be involved in work that allows the audience to go on some kind of journey where they think, 'thank god that's not me going through those harrowing or absurd experiences'. This can happen in comedy or tragedy.

GDC: So what Metanoia production might exemplify what you've just said?

GU: Our version of Chekov's Three Sisters took us into that territory, I think. That was the last show I directed for Metanoia at the Mechanics Institute. I translated the script. I got close to the full cast and used the tiniest space and, most importantly, asked Lara, the set designer, to help us investigate a shift in genre from one act to the next. So, we started with the most stylised form of having everyone in white face using toys for props – like giant Lego pieces – and gradually that form melted away one act at a time. Most importantly, the three sisters were different races – they didn't look like sisters at all. Same for the brothers. So, once the actors are set up in this stylised environment, the idea was that the white face would slowly be melting away and they'd be wiping it off – they were partially half white face, and half not. Over the course of the play this became increasingly smudged and distorted, so that by Act Four, it didn't matter that Irina was African-bodied and Masha was Eastern Europe bodied.

SG: The production transcended all those pathetic constraints that are forced on us by mainstream attitudes that stress literal plausibility – just because it's realism doesn't mean that it has to be real, or conform to a realistic aesthetic, so to me, *Three Sisters* was an exemplary production.

GDC: And what kind of reception did it get?

GU: It was the best of times and the worst of times. I think some

people loved it and some people hated it. And to me, that is the exemplary form for my taste because the last thing I want to do is to make safe work for the sake of making sure that no one dislikes it. If you don't take risks, it just means that there's no room for love. There's no room for the work to be loved, it's just not going to be disliked. It's just going to pass. It's just going to be okay, no one is going to walk away offended. No one's going to walk away hating it. They're just going to walk away going, oh my god, how did they remember all those lines? Another exciting production, from my perspective, was Not a Good Look (NaGL), a play written by Lech Mackiewicz, a Polish Australian actor, director and playwright, who's

FIGURE 1: DONNA DIMOVSKI-KANTAROVSKI, NATALIA NOVIKOVA AND TARIRO MAVONDA IN *THREE SISTERS*. PHOTOGRAPH: DERYK MCALPIN.

since moved back to Poland. He approached us to make the show, and it was an outstanding production. Basically, it was a collection of surreal scenes addressing some of Australia's worst foibles and prejudices.

FIGURE 2: MILES PARAS AND JOSEPH SHERMAN IN *NOT A GOOD LOOK*. PHOTOGRAPH: DERYK MCALPIN.

SG: The last scene was a surreal smorgasbord of Australiana and culturally diverse actors: Reece Vella is Maltese, Judith Chaplin is Anglo-Australian, Joseph Sherman is a Russian Jewish Australian and Miles Paras is Filipina Australian. There was a barbecue with Miles wearing a Ned Kelly helmet with a pair of tongs. It was like an Olympic Opening ceremony.

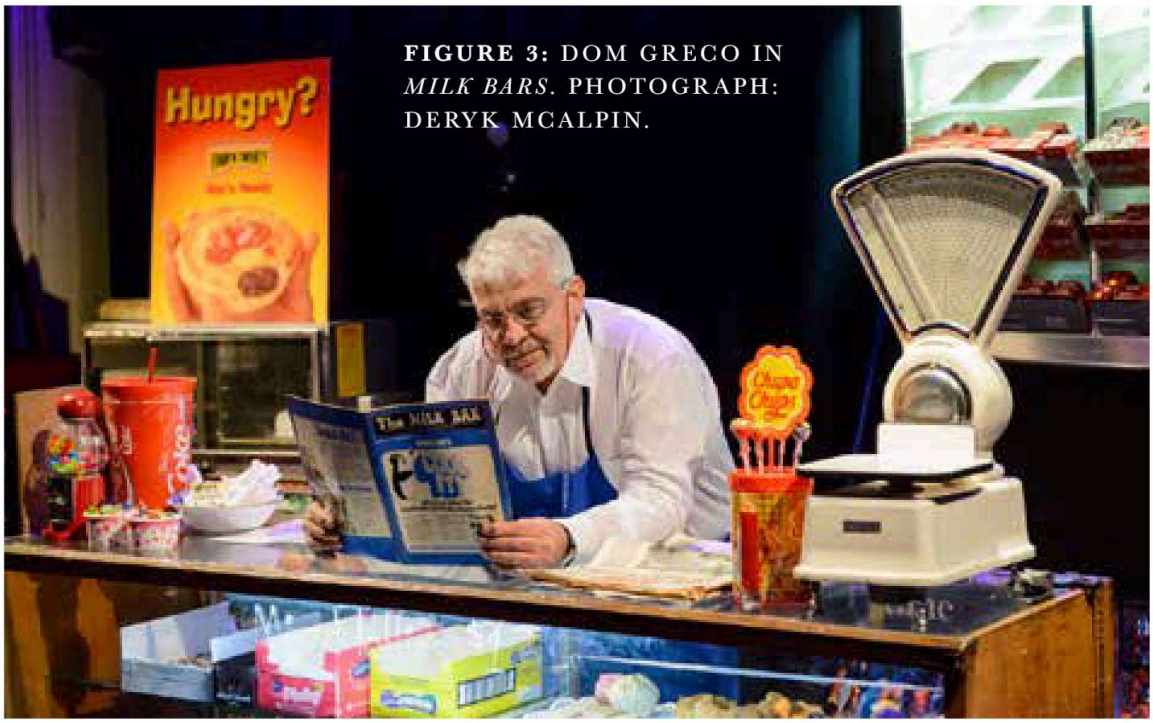

FIGURE 3: DOM GRECO IN *MILK BARS*. PHOTOGRAPH: DERYK MCALPIN.

Joseph Sherman was dressed up as Captain Cook, dragging a platform with a Hills Hoist on it towards the stage.

GDC: Shane, can you talk a bit more about your approach to making theatre?

SG: As a designer, I've worked across all forms of performance from text-based theatre to movement-based dance to performance art. I enjoy working with all genres, but Metanoia gave me an opportunity to explore some other areas of the craft, like writing and performing – I hadn't performed for a long time. I'm drawn to Greg's view of the theatre: the actors act and the audience observe. But then again, I very much enjoyed playing with Görkem's immersive work as well. I had quite a lot of experience with immersive space-based work before

meeting up with Görkem and forming the company. So, I did write for and perform in *Milk Bars* and I wrote a piece for the *Ten Commandments* show that we did the year prior to that.

GA: You also did *Wages of Fear*.

SG: I wrote *Wages of Fear*, which was our last show at the Mechanics Institute. I adapted it from the original novel and referenced some aspects of the film. That was an interesting exercise, taking it back to the novel, which is in some ways quite different to the film. It's a great story about diversity: all the characters come from somewhere else and interact in Australia, where we set it. In short, the play tells the story of itinerant workers who have to drive a truck full of nitroglyc-

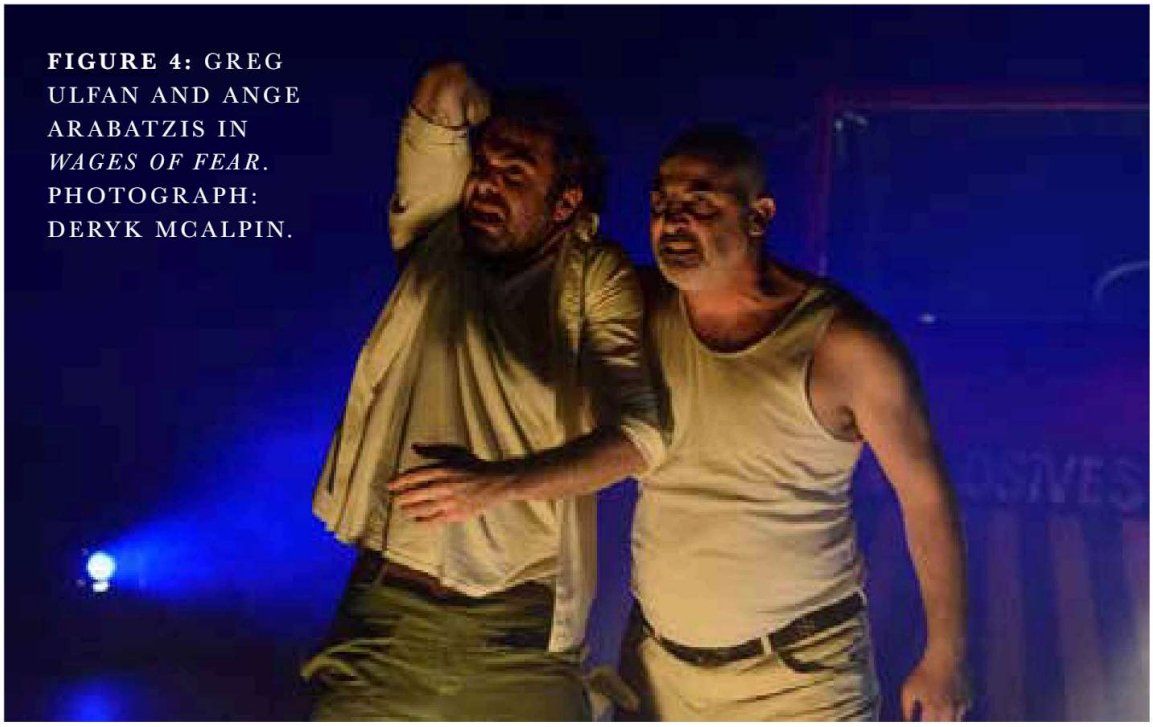

FIGURE 4: GREG ULFAN AND ANGE ARABATZIS IN *WAGES OF FEAR*. PHOTOGRAPH: DERYK MCALPIN.

erin up a mountain to put out an oil well fire – so, at its core, it's a story about the exploitation of workers.

GDC: Görkem, you have a different set of preferences, right?

GA: Well, I love all forms of good theatre, regardless of genre. But I get the most joy and satisfaction from making works that give audiences some kind of physical agency. So, I like having spectators move through spaces, and giving them agency to choose their own journey through the work. I like to create situations where they can be led by curiosity, so I make the kinds of immersive work that Shane was talking about. I'm interested in using the real world as a point of departure. So, I tend to incorporate documentary elements, I like to integrate visual artists and performers in the same projects and juxtapose their work with the work of non-artists and non-performance. For example, the Ten Commandments, or what we called *10Cs*, used every single space at the Mechanics Institute. We worked with ten artists from diverse backgrounds and art forms. And each artist had a different space where they could create whatever they wanted to, based on an assigned commandment.

And at the heart of that work was a scene that Greg developed, having three representatives from the three religions that have a connection to the commandments [Islam, Judaism and

Christianity]. These three people sat on a stage and chatted about the similarities and differences between their respective religions. So, you had all this crazy art everywhere – there was some pretty wild stuff going on in all these rooms. Vissolela created this incredible kind of atmospheric voodoo space and Aseel Tayah sang from the Quran as she broke through each of the rooms. There was Elnaz Sheshgelani, who was doing this wonderful Iranian-inspired puppetry/dance piece. There were things happening everywhere and, then, at the heart of it, you had these people having a chat. My immersive work is really about juxtaposition, I suppose. Audiences either really love our work or they hate it, but as Greg said earlier, we believe that it's important to avoid making safe work that nobody is going to feel strongly about. That said, we have received critical acclaim.

GDC: Metanoia is still an active company, but you no longer occupy and administer the Mechanics Institute.

GA: We were at the Mechanics Institute from 2013 to 2017, and now we're not really based anywhere. We're one of those venue-less companies, but we believe that it's possible to make work anywhere, so we can pop up at any point. Since we left the Mechanics Institute, Shane produced a work in Melbourne.

SG: It was called *Hard Boiled Bush Noir*. It consisted of two

monologues and a dialogue about ice crime in the bush.

GA: We're currently developing another couple of immersive work in the Macedon Ranges, taking over new buildings and spaces. Our next show, *Museum UNDONE*, is about decolonisation, being presented at the Kyneton Museum.

GDC: Can you speak a little bit more about the differences between being a company with a relatively sophisticated infrastructure in a specific location, and one that survives on one-off project grants?

FIGURE 5: ELNAZ SHESHGELANI IN *10CS*. PHOTOGRAPH: DERYK MCALPIN.

GA: I should probably mention that while we were at the Mechanics Institute, all we had, in terms of assets, was access to the building, which was incredible. It was a great resource. I think having a space is a huge advantage for any company or artists' collective. We also had some funds from the council, but it was just a bit more than half an administrator's wage. Apart from that, we had to

generate all of our own income through our programming or through hiring out the venue. But in order to fulfill the remit of the tender, we were compelled to turn the space into a contemporary art space. So, we really had to think very strategically about how we programmed in order to move towards this contemporary art space model. At the same time, we had to make money and, because our ethos was artist centered and artist focused, we had to ensure that our ticket prices were affordable. We didn't receive any other sources of funding while we were at the venue. We also didn't get any core funding, and we still don't have core funding. So, we had a capacity to earn income, but our earnings were modest because we had to pay for the upkeep of the entire venue, marketing, and so on.

Now, we have to rely purely and solely on project money. So that's the key difference. We have no other capacity to earn income apart from making work; we can sell tickets to our productions, but everyone knows that you're not going to make money out of that. Having a venue is a great asset for artists, creatively and financially.

GDC: Just to pick up on a couple of things you've just said, Görkem, how did you make decisions about programming? Did you make collective decisions? Did you have an administrator or did everyone have to pitch in and help with running the company?

GA: We had an administrator at the beginning. So, in the first year at the venue, we had a person with us and we were all working very closely together in terms of decision-making. I think we soon realised that the administrator role was not as important as having an artistic directorial committee, if you like, and that all decisions were made through that process.

SG: With reference to programming, we did it through an expression of interest process where we published an EOI call-out through our website and on other focused websites. And the expressions came in and then, together, the three of us worked through each one and decided which ones would fit into programming the spaces.

GA: One of the things we realised, probably in the second year, was what we really needed to do was differentiate a publicised and promoted artistic programme that was about the identity of the company, Metanoia, which wasn't exclusively our own work. It was largely our work but it was also other programmes that we curated. We provided a lot of space grants and programmes, like our live works programme for experimental art. And so that was the publicised programme, and then the hiring was a separate thing. It gave us more room to allow more people to use the space without worrying so much about how we were going to fulfil that contemporary arts remit. We focused on the quality of the work and the practice, but it was always possible

for people to hire the space for their own projects.

GDC: What do you consider the major achievements of the company?

SG: I think we really achieved the activation of the space. It wasn't being used by the professional artistic community very much before us. There were perhaps three amateur companies using the space, three or four times a year. We were operating seven days a week with performance activities and lots of companies used the venue during our tenure. So, turning the Mechanics Institute into a place where the doors were always open and people were using the space regularly was a great achievement.

GA: The venue was also unique in being run by independent artists who prioritised making creative work. I can't think of any spaces that are artist-led anymore. And to return to the question of cultural and aesthetic diversity, I think we achieved a great deal by consistently programming different styles of performance and privileging artists from culturally diverse backgrounds. We proved that it's possible for artists to run an independent and inclusive space for a wide range of people and to make great art. We also functioned as a development incubator and provided a focus for creative work in the inner north.

GDC: What does the future hold for Metanoia? What are your immediate plans?

GA: Well, the next work after *Museum UNDONE* will be at the Macedon Ranges Farmers Market, *The Deregulated Market of Fact and Fiction* – a playful exploration of neoliberalism. We are now essentially an umbrella organisation – an artist-led company that makes work with great artists in unexpected locations.[4]

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While the interview you have just read does not require further explication, I think it's worth underscoring a few key points by way of indicating the importance of supplementing the *Shifting the Balance* study (2019) mentioned earlier with more detailed, qualitative testimonies from practising artists from non-Anglo backgrounds. Theatre does not exist in a cultural and political vacuum. The prejudices that mark Australian society continue to directly and indirectly exclude and often alienate people with non-normative identities from participating in the performing arts in key creative roles. The views expressed in this article contrast with what appears to be a general acknowledgement that the arts play a vital role in breaking down cultural barriers and contributing to a more socially cohesive national identity, at least from the point of view of spectators.

The arts participation survey *Connecting Australians* (2017) found that:

> More Australians now agree that the arts reflect Australia's cultural diversity (75%, up from 64% in 2013) and that the arts shape and express Australian identity (57%, up from 45% in 2013).
>
> New data collected in the 2016 survey show that three in four Australians believe the arts are an important way to get a different perspective on a topic or issue (73%). Two in three Australians believe that the arts impact their understanding of other people and cultures (64%) and allow them to connect to others (64%). These beliefs contrast with 2013, when only one in three Australians felt that the arts had a large impact on empathy for others (36%).[5]

The Metanoia story is compelling for many reasons, but by articulating the frustrations and struggles that professional non-Anglo artists continue to experience, the company reminds us that we have a long way to go in making the creative industries more inclusive. Going forward, we need to focus less on questions of representation and visibility, as important as they are, and pay more attention to the complex networks that sustain white hegemony. In short, the impediments to creating a successful career as a theatre-maker in Australia for non-Anglo Australians are significant and, as this interview makes clear, these barriers are especially prevalent in the ways training institutions and casting practices reinforce entrenched attitudes towards non-Anglo artists. And while we cannot ignore basic questions concerning access

to project funding and infrastructure, I think that the major problem facing non-Anglo artists is that so few of them are in leadership positions. In his seminal book, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (1998), Ghassan Hage argued that in Australia, debates about multiculturalism assume that migrants and 'ethnics' are passive subjects, who are governed by 'those who have given themselves the national governmental right to "worry" about the nation'.[6] This attitude, he pointed out, is prevalent among political elites regardless of their party affiliation. Hage wrote his influential book at the end of last century, and I'm not sure that his complex and nuanced account of how the national identity is formed by an investment in a fantasy of white supremacy has had an impact outside academia. For me, one of the most illuminating comments made in this interview is that the company's founders did not formulate an 'inclusive' cultural diversity policy because its members had internalised the fact that there is no need to change the face of Australia because it has already been irrevocably changed. The challenge is to white folks to acknowledge this reality.

NOTES

1 Kim Ho, *Cultural Diversity in Australian Theatre: A Statistical Analysis of Theatre Programming*, 2017, online: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0ByYXTE0WqfjtMEpnR3I1aTFGeGM/view, accessed 24 October 2020.

2 James Arvanitakis, Lena Nahlous and Jackie Bailey, *Shifting the Balance: Cultural Diversity in Leadership Within the Australian Arts, Screen and*

Creative Sectors, 2019, online: 10.13140/RG.2.2.13020.54407.

3 Glenn D'Cruz (ed.), *Class Act: Melbourne Workers Theatre 1987–2007* (Melbourne: Vulgar Press, 2007).

4 For further insights from Metanoia's creative team, see *Metanoia Artists Speak*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUsvx1x4KD8.

5 Australia Council for the Arts, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, 2017, 10, online: https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/connecting-australians-natio-59520692c614a.pdf, accessed 24 October 2020.

6 Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 17.