

SHADOWS OF THE AUSTRALIAN PERFORMING ARTS ECOLOGY

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In 1977 in Ankara, Turkey’s capital city, I starred in my first theatrical production, a series of Nasredin Hoja tales. Nasredin Hoja – a philosopher, a Sufi – is remembered for his funny anecdotes in a series of Aesop-like fables that each contain a moral and a message. Nasredin Hoja is the wise fool who famously sat on his donkey backwards and, when asked why, replied: ‘it’s not me that sits on my donkey backwards, it’s my donkey that is facing the wrong way’.

At three years of age, I starred as Nasredin Hoja’s donkey (Figure 1). It was a great honour.

You might ask, ‘Görkem, why are you proud of playing the donkey? He is just a shadow of the main character’, to which I would reply, ‘the shadow is evidence of what is in the light’.

I’m interested in shadows, the image that an object casts when it is in the light. ‘The dark figure which a body “casts” or



FIGURE 1: A 1977 PRESCHOOL PRODUCTION OF *NASREDIN HOJA TALES*, ANKARA, TURKEY. PHOTOGRAPH: AHMET ACAROĞLU.

“throws” upon a surface by intercepting the direct rays of the sun or other luminary.¹

These shadow-casting bodies can be dominant structures that occupy the landscape, or more metaphoric objects – such as what a migrant holds on to, shadowing their new life. Sara Ahmed describes a migrant who ‘holds onto an object that has been lost, who does not let go’, as a melancholic migrant.² The melancholic migrant is one of Ahmed’s killjoys, disrupting notions of national happiness. The melancholic migrant comes from the ‘nations’ perception, attributing a migrant’s unhappiness to an attachment to racism, as if naming

racism, seeing it, holds them back from the true happiness that the nation offers. As if racism is the migrant's problem because they won't get over it, 'reading their exclusion *as* a sign of the ongoing nature of racism'.³

As a child migrant to Australia who has spent much of her theatre career making work that disrupts normative notions of what it means to be Australian, I imagine that I am often seen as a melancholic migrant. Refusing to 'get over it'.

In this article, I will write from my melancholic migrant perspective, a shadow place from within the Australian performing arts. I will write about those of us who occupy these shadows and our relationship to the 'happiness' that the new nation promises through our engagement with theatre.

In my work, shadows have been a feature. Most often as metaphoric shadows, such as in *Museum UNDONE*, an immersive site-specific work presented in June 2021 at the Kyneton Museum with a team of ten interdisciplinary artists, mostly from a range of shadow backgrounds.⁴

The Kyneton Museum is a small regional museum located inside the property and home of the town's historical bank manager and it celebrates a colonial history from the 1800s. Our team engaged with the museum's collection to create short works that shadowed the displays, pointing to the stories that had been left out. The shadow stories – those that are not in the light. Such as Janette Hoe's engagement (Figure 2) with the Chinese gold diggers, unmentioned

in Kyneton Museum's colonial collection. Through three short performance pieces, Hoe brought presence to the Chinese women, rarely mentioned in histories of the gold rush.



FIGURE 2: JANETTE HOE IN *MUSEUM UNDONE*. PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHAL PERERA.

Our artists created short, abstract works that generated atmospheres and enabled audiences to consider what was missing, in order to ask themselves ‘how would we like to be remembered?’ It was our intention that this question gave the

audience agency to consider the way in which stories are told about us, for us and with us and how we want stories to be told in the future.

Sermsah bin Saad (Figure 3) engaged with his own First Nation perspective, taking guidance from Taungurang Elder, Dennis Batty. Bin Saad gave presence to a First People's relationship to the museum's colonial objects. In the scene depicted here, bin Saad

engages with the ‘dining room’ diorama, that consists of a colonial table set for dinner, accompanied by a sound recording of people chatting and eating. Our sound designer used this recording to disrupt its neat, clean narrative while bin Saad, initially dressed as a Governor attempting to eat at their table, eventually suffocates with the weight of its story. Once he removes his coat, the chains that bind him are revealed. Bin Saad created three short pieces in different locations across the museum, engaging with these themes.



FIGURE 3: SERMSAH BIN SAAD IN *MUSEUM UNDONE*. PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHAL PERERA.

Many of *Museum UNDONE*'s performances were non-verbal. These works were accompanied by soundscapes created by sound designer

Kirri Buchler. While initially we had hoped to leave the audience to discover their own journey inside and outside the buildings, COVID restrictions required us to guide the audience on a journey from short work to short work, in three separate groups so no group's journey was identical.

As we largely left the museum's collection untouched, it formed a perfect backdrop to the performance pieces that emerged from within its static objects, enlivening and embodying them. Performers literally emerged from the shadows.



FIGURE 4: YOGASHREE THIRUNAVUKARASU WITH EMILY YATES IN *MUSEUM UNDONE*. PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHAL PERERA.

Yogashree Thirunavukarasu (Figure 4) performed in the master bedroom and dressing room, where she engaged in a performance

monologue with the absent female voice of middle-class Colonial Australia. Yogashree, an Indian Malaysian woman, encountered the ghost of the White woman through a poetic monologue that brought forth this character, bringing presence to all women, no matter their colour. Often the stories of women left out point to the White woman's narrative, but here Thirunavukarasu brought forth an all-encompassing female perspective.



FIGURE 5: ALEXANDRA HARRISON IN *MUSEUM UNDONE*. PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHAL PERERA.

In another spoken-word piece, Alexandra Harrison (Figure 5) engaged with the gold mining history of the region, giving voice and presence to gold itself. In a highly physical performance situated

in the museum's outdoor kitchen, Harrison mapped a vocabulary of gold through her body and language.

Museum UNDONE created dialogue around notions of decolonisation and intersectionality. It asked questions about power and who's story is dominant, and what it takes to construct future narratives. This conscious engagement with decolonisation and decentring the narrative has been a strategy throughout much of my work. Many previous works have engaged with a key concept and provided an immersive space for audiences to explore. Billed as part-performance, part-exhibition, these works are situated among the immersive trend that has emerged over the past two decades, with companies such as Punch Drunk and Meow Wolf. The marked difference between those works and the work of my company, Metanoia Theatre, is that we take a real-world starting point – stories that have been overshadowed by others – and create an immersive work, rather than engage with a play or a fictional narrative, as Punch Drunk have done with their famous *Sleep No More*, and Malthouse emulated in 2021 with *Because the Night*. Our works are what I call 'living documentaries'.

Living documentaries are embodied performances that take place in real-world locations, using text, objects and narrative to bring forth lesser-known perspectives of that place. *The 24 Hour Experience* was my first living documentary, made in 2014 with a huge team of artists and community members, presenting twenty-four live works on the hour, every hour, across Melbourne in locations as diverse as the Forensics Institute, Melbourne Baths and an underground toilet block.

The difference between Metanoia's work and other English-language immersive works is that we engage with performers from an immense diversity of backgrounds, both in terms of their art form and their ethnicity and cultural heritage. We are not grappling with a Shakespearean or English text, but rather engaging with everyday hidden stories and narratives that we ask the performers to engage with, respond to and bring forth from the shadows.

Museum UNDONE builds on my previous works that have engaged with gaps in common knowledge, that bring to light those who have been marginalised or alienated. In this way, knowledge is created that cannot be manufactured through other means. By activating a collection, a new kind of object-oriented dramaturgy emerges. In one way, this is new knowledge, new research, with the thematic focus being questions of history and its gaps. It is also an innovation in form and dramaturgy, in the way it intersects with contemporary practice on a formal level as well as attempting to create new narratives from existing material that ignores questions of race.

In each of my immersive living documentaries, I have engaged consultants and researchers to furnish the collaborating artists with images, narratives, cultural objects and other materials alongside development of the work. Artists synthesise these materials into contemporary embodied performance, bolstering the work. For *Museum UNDONE*, I engaged Kacey Sinclair, PhD candidate at La Trobe University, as research consultant. She provided the artists with the detailed research which they required. We also engaged Uncle Dennis

Batty, Taungurung man, as cultural consultant. He ran preliminary sessions in decolonisation with us as a team and was available to work with artists individually as they created their pieces. This access to research and knowledge is a critical part of the practice. I believe that bringing the artists on the learning journey is crucial. Together we ask questions of untold stories to unearth answers and give them light.

Having created works of this nature for almost two decades, I have found that the capacity for the Australian theatre fraternity to engage is quite limited, despite general public reception being overwhelmingly positive. While fellow artists, academics and occasionally critics attend the work, it appears difficult for them to place it inside the walls of theatre practice. Its cross-over with exhibition and lack of consistent dialogue, incorporation of dance, visual and media arts, renders it less ‘theatrical’. But we are engaged with all that theatre offers: embodiment, presence, liveness, occupation of the same space with audience, text, character, diction, melody. The audience, though, must construct the plot for themselves, therefore the audience relationship is disrupted, as it is with *Sleep No More* and other immersive works.

What is it that limits these quintessentially Australian works from being embraced and recognised as uniquely Australian? Perhaps it is their engagement with non-normative conceptions of Australian identity that make them difficult to embrace. Perhaps because Australian theatre is, as we witness it from the shadows, exclusive and White.

Over the past two years, alongside my arts practice, I have worked with Diversity Arts Australia (DARTS) delivering their Diversity and Equity Program (Fairplay) to arts organisations in Sydney and Melbourne. I have worked with approximately twenty-five organisations, including festivals, theatre companies, peak bodies and other arts and music entities. My role has been as trainer and mentor, assisting companies to become more diverse. I can count on my hand – one hand – how many people working in these organisations come from non-Anglo backgrounds. And, I have hardly come across an artistic leader of any of these companies who is not Anglo. Wesley Enoch is the well-known, celebrated exception.

Diversity Arts Australia's 2019 report, *Shifting the Balance: Cultural Diversity in Leadership within the Australian Arts, Screen and Creative Sectors*, found that 'CALD Australians were under-represented across every leadership role in every cultural sector, organisational type and jurisdiction'.⁵ They identified that 63 per cent of Australia's performing arts sector had no culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) leaders, with non-CALD Australians being nine times more likely to occupy cultural leadership roles than CALD Australians. The report offers a series of recommendations to address this gap, and here I would like to add that changing assumptions about non-Anglo artists would also go a long way towards effecting change.

When I work with arts organisations and ask them to consider why there are so few non-Anglos working in the Australian performing arts, I hear comments of this nature:

‘Parents of non-Anglo people discourage them from working in the arts.’

‘We need to maintain a certain calibre, a certain quality to our work.’

‘There just aren’t any actors of colour.’

‘There just aren’t enough artists from diverse backgrounds.’

My company, Metanoia Theatre, works exclusively with diverse artists, which means that we work with people from all backgrounds, including Anglo Celtic people. One colour among many. It is not hard to find artists from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds. Incredible artists. It simply isn’t true that there are no actors of colour or artists from diverse backgrounds in Australia. It simply isn’t true.

Perhaps lack of diversity at the leadership level, as identified in the *Shifting the Balance* report, impacts the lack of non-Anglo artists’ presence in the performing arts more broadly. As an experiment, I made a random list of ten White male artistic leaders of theatre companies and festivals across Australia and asked a research assistant to trawl through media reports and interviews where these artists describe how they came to be in their leadership positions. Across the board, every person described the same thing: being supported by key industry figures, ‘falling into it’ or being given a ‘leg up’. I will share three stories here as examples and by no means a reflection of these people themselves, only to indicate a wider systemic problem.

The 2022 outgoing Artistic Director of Melbourne Theatre

Company, Brett Sheahey, explained in an interview how he managed to land dream jobs, one after another. His first job in theatre was with the Sydney Theatre Company, where he stayed for ten years. One day, the man who was Director of Sydney Festival at the time called him and said, ‘How’d you like to come and work at the Festival?’ Sheahey had never thought about it before, but after ten years in theatre he became Deputy Director. That was the beginning of his career in festivals.⁶

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* article from 2009, Neil Armfield, then Artistic Director of Sydney’s Belvoir Theatre, said about director Sam Strong: ‘We were looking for potential candidates and I kept on hearing about “this guy in Melbourne” who was supposed to be so good. I got so sick of hearing this, I went to Melbourne to meet him.’⁷ Strong wasn’t planning on leaving Melbourne, but the opportunity to be part of a mainstage company was too good to let go.

Director Benedict Andrews worked as Assistant Director to Neil Armfield, Michael Gow and Jim Sharman. Then Robyn Nevin invited the unknown Andrews into her inaugural season at the Sydney Theatre Company.⁸

‘I was very involved in these different levels of the company while I was here, so I consider those extraordinary years for me’, Benedict says. ‘It was an extraordinary opportunity that Robyn gave me. I was producing a lot and maybe making some mistakes and learning a lot of things and she

kept backing me when some audiences [were saying] ‘we don’t want this’.⁹

From these examples, we learn that in the Australian performing arts, for a certain demographic, one can be spoken of highly and Neil Armfield may hear about it and headhunt you. One can be unknown and invited by Robyn Nevin to join a mainstage company and when there, one can make mistakes and Robyn will back you. One can work for ten years in a mainstage company, and it will pay off.

In stark contrast to this exclusively White experience, Michael Mohammed Ahmad eloquently and intricately depicts his experience as a young aspiring artist in his autofiction *The Lebs*. He describes his first introduction to theatre when invited to work on a creative development about Muslim men and violence that subsequently introduced him to White violence. When the director explained to him that the profanity about the Prophet Muhammed which she had placed on the rehearsal room wall as ‘inspiration’ had ‘nothing to do with what we think of you, good sir’, he writes: ‘but this actually has everything to do with what she thinks of me. She thinks I’m a fake too; that “Muslim” is just a character I play. Is that what it means to be an artist, that all your beliefs are an act?’¹⁰ Rather than fostering a young Lebanese Muslim man’s passion for theatre, the Anglo theatre artists with whom he worked marginalised, alienated and ridiculed him, engaging him purely as an example of what they perceived to be male Muslim violence.

A while ago, I attended a meeting with the artistic leadership of Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC). The meeting had been organised by two older female directors as part of a push for more women in theatre.

In that discussion, we pointed out that a young White male recently graduated director from Victorian College of the Arts was directing a mainstage production at MTC and we wondered how that had happened and if a similar pathway could be created for women. We were told, ‘Oh, he was just in the right place at the right time’.

Since then, I have wondered how I or any director like me would know what the right place and the right time would look like. I reflect that I have had many meetings with artistic leaders of mainstage companies, of festivals and other organisations, talking about my work, speaking about ideas for productions, but it seems that those times were not the right times.

I wonder what the right time looks like? I suppose the right place is in the light. If I were in the same place as the person who is in ‘the right place at the right time’, would I be seen? Or would I remain a shadow? Blocked from the light. Is it, in fact, about being in the right place at the right time, or about being the right person in the right place at the right time?

Reflecting on the number of White men that run theatre companies in Australia, I often wonder why people reject quotas. Surely the mono-demographic of our artistic leaders is a form of quota? To be able to run a funded theatre company or a festival in

Australia, one must be of a certain demographic. In the right place at the right time.

I would like to share a related Nasredin Hoja tale.

Nasredin Hoja was invited to dinner at the house of a noble man. He had been working in the fields all day, so turned up looking rather shabby. When he arrived, everyone ignored him, no one would pass him food and the host as well as the other guests were all very rude. He left the dinner, went home and put on a very expensive coat and then came back to the party. Now he was greeted with much respect, he was given a seat at the head of the table and treated with dignity. Nasredin took the food that was passed to him, and put spoonfuls into his coat pocket, then spoonfuls on to the coat itself. People asked him, 'Hoja [which means 'teacher'], what are you doing?' And Nasredin replied, 'Well, it was my coat that you accepted to your dinner, so I am feeding it'.

People say that if there is a quota system, then those who get in will feel inadequate because they will know that they are only there because of the quota. But surely this must be the case for the unnamed quota system that currently exists where only White men are able to run our theatres?

Like Nasredin Hoja's coat, Sara Ahmed talks about privilege as 'an old garment'. She says:

If it has acquired the shape of those who tend to wear it, then it becomes easier to wear if you have that shape. You

do not have to pass because you do not have to think about it, you just pull it on; you just move on. Easier to wear: this is why I think of privilege as an energy saving device. Less effort is required to be or to do.¹¹

The current demographics of artistic leaders in the Australian performing arts indicates that one must fit the right coat at the right time. From the examples mentioned above, one could draw the conclusion that White luminaries will help young aspiring White male artists and they will make it. Because they fit.

Being supported to make mistakes, do daring things, have someone important back you in the face of doubting audiences, to be head-hunted, supported, spoken of highly, to be given a chance to work with seasoned actors in a mainstage company when just starting out – these are the things that will set someone up for a healthy career.

Perhaps all those ‘coats’ should think of *The Emperor’s New Clothes* and consider how they appear to those who look on from the shadows – watching, observing, witnessing, seeing.

The way we structure our now dwindling theatre courses at university also has a part to play. As a long-time sessional and occasionally contracted lecturer at university, I have had to dig very deep to find a theatre practitioner or an artist who is not White in any of the theatre courses that I have been asked to teach.

Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) define ‘intersectionality’ as intersecting power relations that

influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences.¹²

If the institution of theatre, the institution of the academy, and the festival, are all White spaces, occupied by Whiteness, then how can non-Anglo theatre artists think that they, too, might contribute to theory, to knowledge-making in such environments? Every time a work is programmed, an actor is cast, a course is taught, colonialism is re-enacted unless there is a conscious dismantling of White power and its intersecting imbalances.

One of the biggest barriers for artists from non-Anglo backgrounds is the lack of support from the industry itself. As Australians, we have been taught to see non-Anglos as less than, as not as smart or competent or capable as White others. Leaders in our industry help people who look and feel and have world views similar to their own. There is a fear that ‘those others’, who make up 50 per cent of the population, will come and take jobs, because there are so few places at the table of Australian theatre, so we feed the coat that fits the image of the one suitable to attend the dinner. What we end up with is an unnamed quota system where key directorial, educational and leadership roles are only able to be taken up by a certain demographic of the population.

Without clearly identified pathways in the industry, it will remain largely White, mono-cultural, only occasionally engaging people from different backgrounds as tokens, and those people will get through only if they suck up their own cultural safety.

Those who have been Othered are conscious of the repercussions of being racially aware or vocal in professional or personal life. Of being labelled or seen as the melancholic migrant, holding on to racism and not getting over it. We know the risks and penalties for assertiveness and will often remain silent so as not to jeopardise with friends, neighbours or colleagues. Past experience proves that we won't be selected, accepted, listened to, encouraged to apply for funding, roles, opportunities, jobs. Anglo-centric notions of what is considered 'good art' – Eurocentric perspectives and discourses of discovery – govern the type of work that is considered excellent.

A shadow can emerge from the dark.

It can chase you.

In folklore and pop culture, shadows come to life, they are malevolent beings that try to control the people they reflect.

Shadows are not White.

I can be in the shadow of someone, or I can shadow someone.

I can be lured into the shadows.

Foreshadowed

Overshadowed.

When an object is lit, it casts a shadow. The shadow is intrinsic to the object. Though the shadow has no substance, it is inextricably linked to the object as evidence that the object was in the limelight, in the ‘right place at the right time’.

Surely it is the right time to redirect the light?

NOTES

- 1 ‘shadow, n.’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2021. Web. 18 November 2021.
- 2 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 139.
- 3 Sara Ahmed, ‘Melancholic Migrants’, *Feminist Killjoys Blog* (1 April 2021), Melancholic Migrants | feministkilljoys.
- 4 *Museum UNDONE*. By Görkem Acaroğlu, Janette Hoe, Sermsah bin Saad, Alexandra Harrison, Kirri Buchler, Desmond Lazaro, Yogashree Thirunavukarasu, Greg Ulfan, Shane Grant, Maddi Moser. Kyneton Museum, June 2021. To see excerpts of *Museum UNDONE*, please visit <https://youtu.be/ZqDBgz18mP0>.
- 5 Diversity Arts Australia, BYP Group and Western Sydney University, *Shifting the Balance: Cultural Diversity in Leadership Within the Australian Arts, Screen and Creative Sectors* (Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, 2019).
- 6 Erin James, ‘An Afternoon with Brett Sheehy, Melbourne Festival’s Artistic Director’, *Aussie Theatre.com*, September 2011, An afternoon with Brett Sheehy, Melbourne Festival’s Artistic Director | Features (aussietheatre.com.au).
- 7 Emily Dunn, ‘Cut and Polish’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 2009, Cut and polish (smh.com.au).
- 8 Peter Robb, ‘Under Surveillance’, *The Monthly*, June 2011, Under surveillance | The Monthly.
- 9 Jo Litson, ‘Meet Benedict Andrews’, *Sydney Theatre Newsletter*, 6 October 2011, <https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/magazine/posts/2011/october/feature-meet-benedict-andrews>.
- 10 Michael Mohammed Ahmad, *The Lebs* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2018) 228.
- 11 Sara Ahmed, ‘Some Striking Feature: Whiteness and Institutional Passing’, *Feminist Killjoys Blog* (14 June 2015), <https://feministkilljoys.com>.

com/2015/06/14/
some-striking-feature.

- 12 Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016) 14.