AMPLIFY COLLECTIVE WRITING AND PUBLISHING

Sweatshop is a Western Sydney-based literary movement founded by award-winning writer Michael Mohammed Ahmad. Photo: Supplied.

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CALD, CARM and collected: fostering the future artists of Australia

Leaders of Australia's foremost arts companies run by and with culturally and linguistically diverse young people, speak about their role in the arts ecology.

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Görkem Acaroğlu

There are several arts companies across Australian cities working with young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) backgrounds – Sweatshop, CuriousWorks, Outer Urban Projects to name just a few. Each of these companies work largely with young people from CALD backgrounds, and are often situated within culturally-rich suburbs.

In this article *ArtsHub* speaks with their CEOs and artistic directors to find out why this work is necessary. How do these companies fit within the wider arts ecology? And given that over 50% of the Australian population is now culturally diverse, do mainstream arts companies have more to do in representing the populations they serve?

Kiriaki Zakinthinos is the CEO of **CuriousWorks**, a company that exists at the intersection of contemporary multi-arts practice and community arts and cultural development. CuriousWorks is a Western Sydney-based organisation built by and for Western Sydney artists. Beginning in 2005 as a start-up committed to telling diverse community stories, the company was founded and led by a then young Sri Lankan artist from Western Sydney, S. Shakthidharan.

Today, the company is run by a team of mostly local people. Zakinthinos tells *ArtsHub*, 'Internally we don't talk about diversity. We are just co-workers. It's the norm.

'We are locals from the region [and] I went to Fairvale High. I wasn't diverse or different growing up in Canley Heights. We are the centre – we are not different, or on the periphery, or other,' she adds.

CuriousWorks staunchly describes itself as a community arts organisation. 'Our work is based around community co-creation, co-design, working together and serving those communities around us. You can define it in different ways, but community art is a process,' says Zakinthinos.

Yet community art is often seen within a hierarchy of arts practice, with Eurocentric models of artistic practices at the top. Zakinthinos continues: 'I completely reject this idea that community art stands in opposition to what is considered professional art or artistic excellence. For us, community art is a way of addressing excellence, and there are so many ways to address artistic excellence and vibrancy – from ensuring integrity in your processes, working slowly and building authentic relationships, to the shared experiences participants and audiences can have of enrichment, emotional resonance and social bonding.'

Important work is being delivered by companies like CuriousWorks, but are these organisations resourced in the same way as other arts companies? The **2023 State of the Arts in Western Sydney Report**, states: 'Arts and culture is not equal across greater Sydney; 50% (and counting) of Sydney residents call Western Sydney home and yet received less than 3.5% of state infrastructure funding awarded to Sydney. Western Sydney residents received less than 10% of state funding across various programs awarded by Create NSW from 2021 – 2022 . In Blacktown, home to 400,000 people, support for arts and cultural activity drops to less than 1%.'

Read: Diversity and the regional arts sector

Sweatshop is a literacy movement based in Western Sydney, dedicated to empowering culturally and linguistically diverse communities through reading, writing and critical thinking. The Sweatshop movement aims to create new and complex forms of artistic representation that counteract negative stereotypes and centre "own-voice" narratives.

Sweatshop was founded by award-winning writer **Michael Mohammed Ahmad** in 2013 to fill a gap and address the huge discrepancy between arts resources and opportunities that CALD and First Nations artists receive, compared to members of the dominant white culture.

Ahmad says: 'The statistics show that there is a huge gap between people identified as CALD and First Nations and those identified as white in the Australian arts.'

He challenges the excuse of merit, often used to explain why most opportunities in the arts go to white Australians, whether that be in publishing or mainstage theatre.

Ahmad says: 'Anyone who uses "meritocracy" as an argument is more racist than those that just admit they prefer the company of their own race. If you think the discrepancy is because of merit, then you are saying that – all things being equal – white people come out on top 95% of the time. This is the literal definition of "white supremacy".

'You would think that people who are multilingual, people who have come from all over the world, would have a lot to contribute to the arts, especially in literature, which is supposed to centre and celebrate the complexity of human languages. The idea that we aren't good enough is illogical and racist. It doesn't add up.'

Ahmad describes the difference between a white-led organisation that is helping culturally-marginalised young people and an organisation that is self-determined, working with people from its own community.

'The thousands of culturally diverse young people we work with can always see themselves mirrored through the artists at Sweatshop,' he says. 'In August, one of our most brilliant writers, Sara M Saleh, released her critically-acclaimed debut novel, ***Songs for the Dead and the Living*** – an own-voices narrative about the experience of being Palestinian at a time when Palestinians require more representation and compassion than ever before.'

Similarly, Sweatshop General Manager Winnie Dunn is about to become the first Tongan Australian writer to ever publish a novel – titled ***Dirt Poor Islanders*** – with a multinational publisher.

Ahmad says: 'No amount of goodwill from the dominant culture will ever be able to inspire and empower the Pasifika Australian community as much as someone like Winnie. Without her, all we have is Chris Lilley doing brown face in *Jonah from Tonga*.'

Sweatshop founder Michael Mohammed Ahmad (left) and General Manager Winnie Dunn (right). Photo: Supplied.

Sweatshop is a brilliant example of a self-determined solution to the economic divide that exists in the arts between white Australians and POC. While the organisation exclusively hires and supports First Nations and culturally diverse artists, Ahmad explains that Sweatshop proudly collaborates and partners with anyone – black, brown and white – who seeks to end the 'miserable condition' of racism that plagues Australia.

'Our movement is not about lecturing White Australians; it's about First Nations people and people of colour taking it upon ourselves to create humanising alternatives to the damaging narratives that harm our communities,' says Ahmad. 'White Australians can support us by investing in our art and fostering spaces for us to share our work. There's only one way forward for Australia: together.'

The situation in Melbourne

In Melbourne's northern suburbs, **Outer Urban Projects** (OUP) has been making community arts and undertaking cultural development in the performing arts since 2012. OUP describes its work as intergenerational. The organisation collaborates with emerging artists and their communities delivering an artistic program that reflects the 'complex face of contemporary Australia and challenges the architecture of access in the Australian arts industry,' as stated on its website.

ArtsHub asks OUP co-CEO and Artistic Director, Irine Vela, about the perception that community arts are "less valid".

'This is a misguided perception that ghettoises certain communities and ways of making work. The notion that excellence can't exist in the community arts space is a variation of Australian cultural cringe and reflects how so-called "mainstream society" thinks about the "non-anglo sphere, or people of low socioeconomic backgrounds", for example, and their art forms.'

Vela continues: 'History shows us that the stronger the art of the people, of communities, the more vibrant the nation's culture. Community-based art is another genre of art-making and can be as visionary and aspirational as any other art form – and is influencing the way we make art on the mainstages more and more.'

Vela notes how the community development movement recognises that some people don't have the means to engage in what is perceived as the "mainstream".

'This can be because of "class", or low economic status and their position as outsiders in society, because they don't have English [skills] or their parents don't and they face systemic racism and discrimination. So there is a need for organisations like us. It does meet a very important need in the arts ecology.'

When asked whether she thinks mainstream companies do enough work engaging young people and artists from marginalised areas, Vela responds: 'I don't think they do enough work to actively engage with community organisations. Organisations like us create a lot of phenomenal artists, movements and audiences that feed the mainstream. The influence of the community arts sector has changed the game for the mainstream. There has been a revolution that has happened on our mainstages in terms of representation and diversifying, and that has been driven by companies like us.'

The small to medium and independent arts sector has seen massive funding cuts over the past decade, which has resulted in many companies closing or struggling to stay open. Vela points out that, with the absence of a cohesive and inclusive national arts and cultural policy in the small to medium and independent arts sector, 'the system encourages hyper-competition, secrecy via the non-disclosure of outcomes and separation'. She adds: 'At times this can pit us against each other. Despite this, there is a genuine collegial and supportive culture, and recognition of the important work we deliver.'

To conclude, Vela asks some very key questions about how resources are managed and distributed. 'On what basis does the system prioritise who gets more or less or, indeed, who gets left out? Is it fair? The whole sector needs to advocate for each other – including the major [players]. Costs and cuts need to be shared. Funding has to be inclusive and all of us who work in the arts sector need to fight for this.'

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Görkem Acaroğlu

Dr Görkem Acaroğlu is a theatre director, writer and dramaturg, an interdisciplinary artist, educator and diversity consultant. She has over 25 years experience making all forms of theatre, privileging marginalised and lesser heard perspectives and artists. She has worked as Arts Participation Manager at City of Melbourne, Program Producer at Fed Square, Art and Performance Lecturer at Deakin University and Artistic Director and Programmer of The Mechanics Institute in Brunswick from 2013-2017 when her theatre company, Metanoia Theatre, won a tender to convert the then hall-for-hire into a contemporary arts space.

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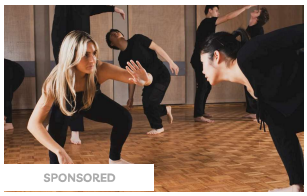
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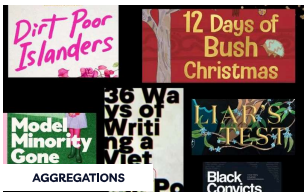

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