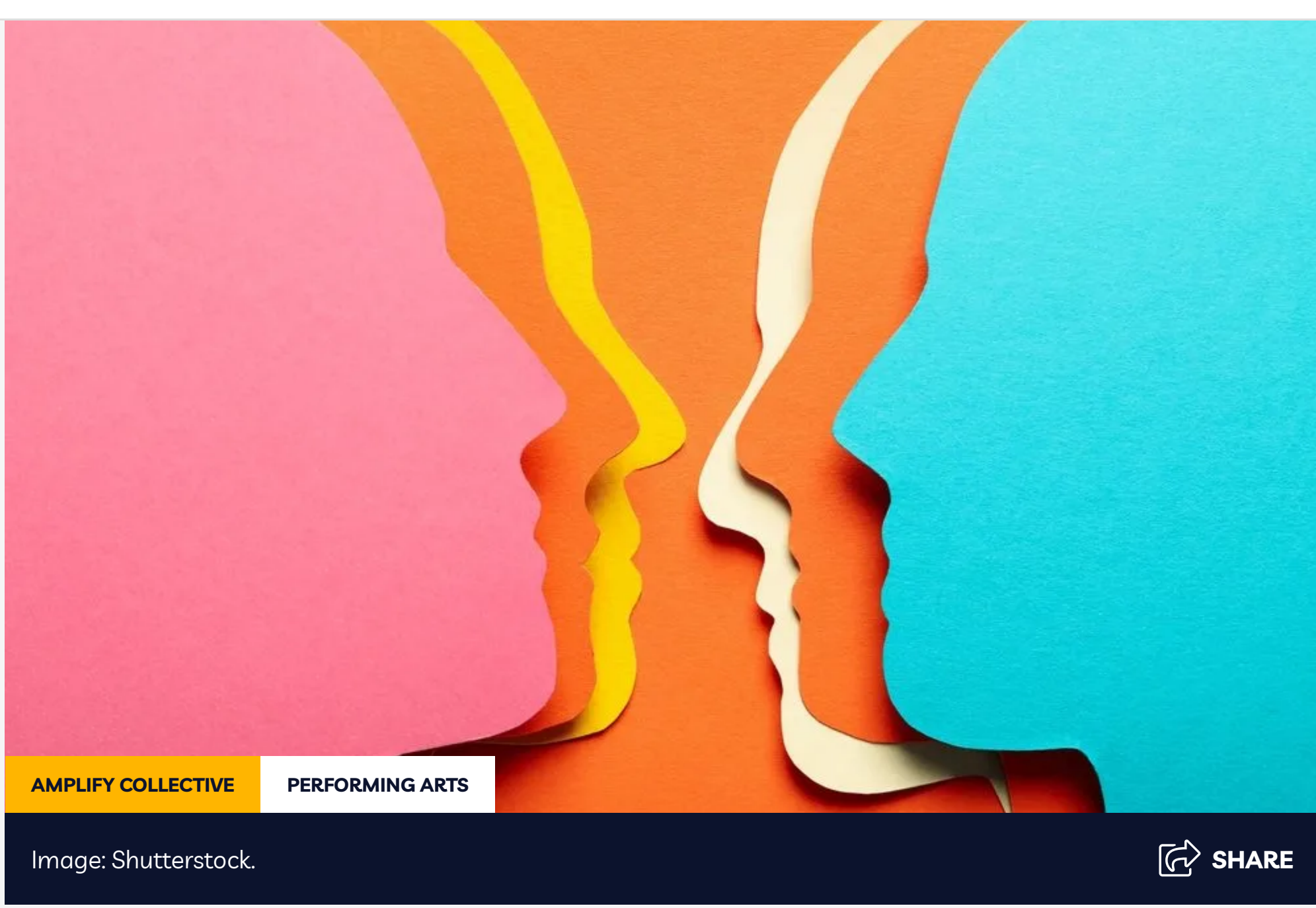


# Uninvited to the mainstage: the unfortunate consequence of approaching diversity without respect

New diversity initiatives shouldn't disregard the history of older artists and arts workers fighting in this space.

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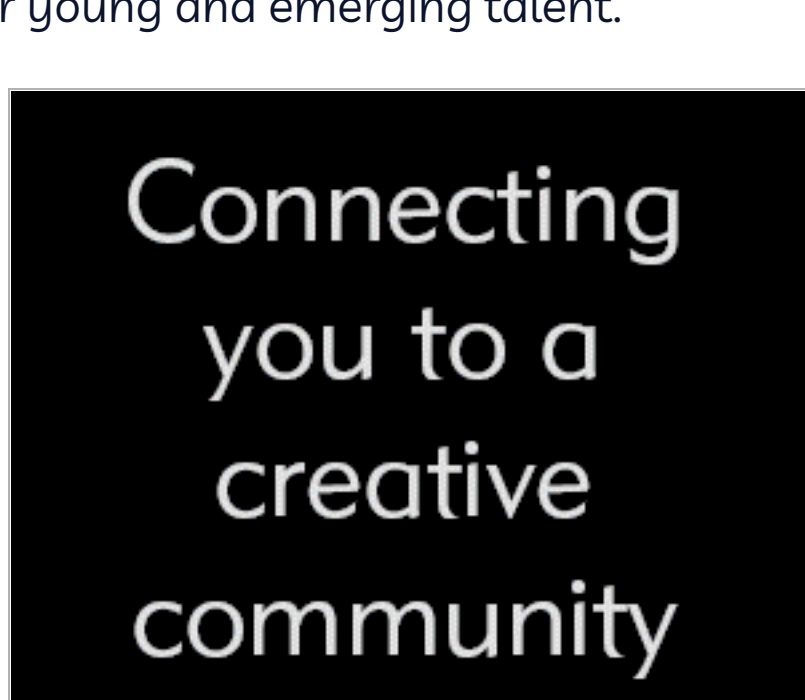
Görkem Acaroğlu



Recently we have seen an increase in the number of mainstream theatre companies and arts institutions rectifying their historical lack of engagement with non-Anglo artists, content, and audiences. Some companies seek advice, training and guidance to do this. However, some companies, especially larger, better resourced companies, implement their own diversity initiatives.

The realisation in the arts that there is a need to diversify, that it is no longer acceptable to produce only work by Anglo-Celtic Australians or to portray only a white Australian perspective, is long overdue. The recognition that leadership and management of arts companies can no longer be represented by a narrow and predominantly Anglo-Celtic demographic is something that we who live and work in 'diverse' Australia are of course pleased by. However, as arts companies seek to diversify, it is important not to maintain racist and colonialist strategies that perpetuate white mythologies of superiority.

Several theatre companies and arts institutions have opened their doors to more artists of colour and artists from diverse and marginalised backgrounds by engaging young and emerging artists. This is a wonderful and much needed approach, however, by only engaging young and emerging artists, an ideology is perpetuated that is all too familiar, the ideology that there 'just aren't enough artists from non-Anglo backgrounds out there', or 'artists from diverse backgrounds are not good enough or ready enough to be engaged' therefore they, the liberators, need to foster young and emerging talent.



For those of my generation and older (working in the arts for 20, 30, 40 or more years), this is an insult. Why are older artists and arts workers from First Nations, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) or Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) backgrounds not called upon by institutions to produce work and provide knowledge? It is great that arts institutions are jumping on the bandwagon of diversity, but there is a culture of 'we can do it ourselves' that undermines the knowledge held by those who have been working in this space for decades.

Widi Yamatji Nyarlu independent artist and previous Artistic Director of Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company in Perth, Eva Grace Mullahey tells *ArtsHub*: 'I think they find older generations problematic because we have been burnt by them in the past. Through experience, we've discovered a more natural way to make work for us and it's different, so they bring in young people that will say 'yes' to their way of doing things. But young and emerging artists haven't lived through the disparity of diversity that we have.'

Mullahey says companies that are trying to diversify need to first accept that they aren't diverse.

'We call ourselves BlackFulla theatre companies but there are no theatre companies that call themselves white or non-Indigenous theatre companies, when that is what they are. There is a sheer lack of BIPOC people in positions of power. Companies should be looking to diversifying their management and executive teams as well as their Boards, rather than only providing opportunities for youth.'

Lena Nahlous, CEO of Diversity Arts Australia, has been working in the diversity and inclusion space for 30 years. Lena says: 'Countless non-Anglo artists have fought for generations for equal access in the arts, sharing their strategies and labour. It's insulting when well-funded companies marginalise these historical contributions and offer limited opportunities to young diverse talent while claiming inclusivity and diversity. Isn't this another form of colonising, erasing history for a white-centric solution? Neglecting consultation with and learning from elder experts is a missed opportunity.'

It is true many older practitioners from diverse backgrounds leave the arts, precisely because they are not engaged during the various stages of their career. Others, like Paula Abood, have limited time for their own arts practice, because they spend their lives advocating for change. Now change comes, but with little respect for those advocates, because well-funded institutions feel they know how to be diverse. The lack of allyship over the years is not forgotten. Engaging only young artists and arts workers from diverse backgrounds erases the history of struggle and the work done by so many, over so long.

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*ArtsHub* asks anti-racism educator and consultant Erfan Daliri about these questions. He says that it was not an uncommon dynamic, one that he has personal experience with as well as his artist father, and many of his friends and acquaintances.

'The moment a person has their wits about them, or is established as an artist or consultant, or has something other than the "grateful migrant" narrative, they get sidelined from white power structures and institutions,' says Daliri. 'All of this helps feed and fuel the saviourism and "liberator" persona, which helps white people justify their own internalised sense of white supremacy. As for the not enough "talent" comments, I'm well aware of that racist point of view, as the [Josh Thomas example](#) highlights.'

In 2016 comedian Josh Thomas sat on a panel with other white actors to discuss diversity (an example of a white institution coming up with diversity strategies without consultation).

Thomas was speaking about the difficulties he claimed he had when casting his series *Pleasant Like Me*. Thomas said, 'Finding an experienced actor that's not white is really hard. You find yourself in a situation where you want to be more diverse, but this person doesn't have as much experience as this person, and then it's hard to know what to do, because you don't want to be favouring people when they're not going to do a good job.'

We should thank Josh for articulating so clearly what some arts institutions in Australia demonstrate, a belief that actors and artists from 'diverse' backgrounds aren't good enough and don't have enough experience to be mainstream.

On this point, Mullahey says: 'The number of times I have been employed for my Aboriginality and not my skill set, is incredible. But I have a massive skill set, and if you take into account my cultural knowledge, I have a bigger skill set than most. I've had conversations with artistic directors in a number of Australian cities and I've said "You think we are amateur because we aren't telling the stories you want to tell. Why can't we tell the stories we want to tell, and you support us?"'

Watching an Australian television series that employed 'diverse actors', my partner pointed out that the older actors were Anglo-Celtic, but the younger actors were 'culturally diverse', again perpetuating the same myth that Australia is only recently diverse. We became diverse the moment the mainstream decided the doors could be opened. This is a recognised act of colonisation – to deny history and create myths about the contemporary and now.

Leonid Verzub is a Russian theatre director and educator, now 83 years old, who came to Australia as an adult with little English. He trained in the Stanislavsky theatre tradition under Leonid Fyodorovich Makriyev and Maria Knebel who was a student of Konstantin Stanislavski, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Michael Chekhov. Theatre people will know these masters of Western theatre history. When speaking with Verzub via actor, director and translator, Greg Ulfan, he says, 'The things I am capable of doing and was capable of doing, are all due, thankfully, to my masters who had colossal bodies of work both as practitioners and pedagogues.'

Despite Verzub's incredible knowledge and experience, despite being known very well by established and respected Australian theatre practitioners, Verzub has remained, as he describes it 'uninvited' to the mainstage.

'Australian practitioners of the theatre arts are very principled and goal driven people...but unfortunately, they do not let anyone through the doorway of their business. Without the Australian language, I came here in the hope that I would be able to share my experience with the country. Evidently the level of my education and my experience is unacceptable for Australian theatre or doesn't suit Australian theatre.'

Surely a country like Australia that often prides itself on its diverse population, can afford translators? Most institutions pay for Auslan which is a form of translation. If it means passing significant knowledge on to other theatre practitioners, it should not be that difficult to create a translation budget line.

Verzub explains that when he first arrived, for example, he met with key theatre people such as Aubrey Mellor at Playbox Theatre, who was the only mainstream Artistic Director that supported him through applications, support letters, proposals and recommendations. Despite this, Verzub was not engaged by the company because the policy at the time was to make "Australian theatre" without any external influences or tendencies.

Owing to the work of a couple of academics, Verzub has been invited to conduct one-off masterclasses and workshops over the years, at a handful of training institutions, including the VCA, NIDA and Charles Sturt University. It is not as if institutions do not know Verzub. 'Of course, it's great to share the knowledge with young people,' he says, 'but young people need to be passed on the experience. They deserve decent training.'

Verzub spoke with *ArtsHub* in Russian through translation, not because he doesn't speak English, but because he wants to ensure he imparts the correct meaning. However, he did consistently use one word in English throughout our interview. That word is 'unfortunately'. 'When I first heard it, I wondered if this word "unfortunately" was invented for immigrants like me,' Leonid explains.

Unfortunately, it may have been.

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