

CONVERGE 2019 Keynote

Sonya Soares:

#justnotthatmany – Reframing Australian stories and storytelling

Hello Colleagues! My name is Sonya Soares. I am a performer, director, artistic director, dramaturg and activist and 2019 marks my 25th year of professional practice. It is also the year that I roped three of my colleagues on Melbourne's Equity Diversity Committee into launching the #justnotthatmany campaign – a grass-roots, online visibility initiative promoting inclusion and better representation on and behind our stages and screens. [Here are some photos. The first is the image that launched the concept for the campaign/ the campaign itself. I had this idea in December last year that we should document a moment when there were so many desi or South Asian women working in our industry and in the middle of silly season, 14 women rocked up and frocked up for this photo and a further 16 that we knew about couldn't make it ... and there were quite obviously more. So in the taking of this shot was the seed of the campaign and it's spread to Brisbane and even Beijing over the last nine months. Here's our Epic "all-in" shot at Arts Centre Melbourne as part of the Kiln program, here's a Sydney shot and one from Perth last week. This is a small sample, there's loads more and I invite you to check us out on @justnotthatmany on FB/ Insta/ Twitter for more information.]

It is this "calling" – aka my compulsive tendency to instigate awkward/ constructive conversations with my peers with a view to the overall betterment of our industry – as well as my work with/ for young people that I believe has earned me the privilege of this platform today. And I want to use the remaining 12 minutes to talk about reframing Australian stories and storytelling: i.e. who are the "we" when "we" tell our stories – who does that include?

I feel fairly confident that I am addressing a room of people who understand/ agree that our industry is insidiously inscribed by systemic inequality. Many of you will have read Diversity Arts Australia's recent report "Shifting the Balance" and/ or have attended dozens if not decades worth of panel discussions, forums, symposiums or if you've been very lucky, individual-led interventions on this topic. However – alas and alack - despite all of the cumulative knowledge, study, advocacy that abounds on this issue, our industry remains very white, very male, very ablest. And worse, theatre for young people as a microcosm of the broader sector, is described by even greater erasure of difference and diversity.

So. I am not going to waste precious minutes justifying the need to diversify our stages. I believe – and here's the ex-philosophy student in me – I believe you understand the argument from Creativity. And the argument from Social Justice. Given the lack of representation in theatre for young people, I want to use my remaining time to give you an insight into the argument from Lived Experience.

Because yes, for those of you furiously doing the quick-maths earlier, I started my professional practice as a young person.

Quick backstory: I was born in Melbourne and grew up in the badlands of the south eastern suburbs in the 80s. At that time, Glen Waverley was not the multi-cultural hot spot it is today – it was like living in an Omo ad. When I started primary school at Mimosa, Esther Wong and I were the only non-white kids I clapped eyes on, until my brothers rocked up. And someone had taken the trouble the graffiti the No Entry signs along the slip lanes on my path to and from school so they read “Indians: No Entry”. Which at the time I thought was a rather unfortunate coincidence and only much later in life realized was a pointed act of racial aggression aimed at a 5 year old child and later, her siblings. I clocked those signs every day, twice a day for my entire primary school existence from ages 5-12. Suffice to say, that was not the most pointed, nor the most aggressive acts of racism I experienced during that period.

Cut to: teenage Sonya. There she is; she was a late bloomer, folks – don’t judge her. Very bright, utterly trapped and a little bit bullied at Glen Waverley Secondary College, I applied for and was accepted to an academic school in the city, MacRobertson Girls’ High School. This was the first and to this day, the most replete, truly multi-cultural space I’ve ever existed in day to day and it was like entering a bath. Tension I never knew existed melted from my body. I was no longer in a minority, we were utterly exempt from the male-gaze and the horizons of my identity expanded exponentially. I’d previously understood myself through the narrow parameters/ lens/ mirror of my peers – because don’t we all? I was the nerdy girl, therefore I supposed I would become a doctor or a lawyer or something along those lines. But surrounded by young women who looked like me, were brainy like me, who befriended me and who challenged me, I suddenly had permission to explore the parameters of my humanity. I took singing lessons, signed up for House Drama, produced my first play at 16 and in that same year, was cast as a series regular in popular sci-fi television series called Ocean Girl. I’d found the fullest and most satisfying expression of my unfolding personality in the realm of imagination, metaphor and inter-cultural communication that is the performing arts. Fee diddly dee, an actor’s life for me!

This has been one of the most poignant and painful paradoxes of my life. It was the 90s! Who knew that in the wholehearted pursuit of a career in the artform that unlocked me and allowed me my fullest human expression, I would find myself in a sector that relentlessly marginalised, stereotyped or in many cases (one being the celebrated screen translation of Christos Tsolkis’ *The Slap* / the character of Aisha) entirely erased me. And this is not just me cribbing about a lost role – apparently they jettisoned Aisha’s Indian identity in the show because there were #justnotthatmany of us. Colleagues, I refer to you my first slide.

Why this particular example? Ok so, about a decade after graduating WAAPA, heavily pregnant with my second child, I was developing a new work with acclaimed independent theatre-makers, Elbow Room, who asked us to list our dream roles growing up. I brought a list as long of your arm of unfilled longing for Shakespearean and Chekavian heroines, Ibsen, Stoppard, Wilde, Williams, Ayckbourn, Churchill. (Yes, this is a very white list – I refer you again to Slide 5 and the cultural landscape of my childhood. These are also the canon of female characters with story arcs.) The creatives also asked us to distill how we were

framed by our industry. I cited a solid year of being cast as characters that were either Muslim, doctors, or Muslim doctors. The erasure of complex characters like Aisha from our story-telling matters.

Nevertheless, I persisted with the abusive lover of my chosen career and in recent years, in amongst running a company, mentoring, serving on panels and performing unsolicited interventions, I find myself frequently called upon in the development of new Australian work. Older dreams have given way to the excitement of speaking directly to the next generation of Australian adults about issues that include but are obviously not limited to who we are (MTC's *Melbourne Talam*), who we have been (Arena Theatre's *Air Race*), where we're headed (Fleur Kilpatrick's award winning, *Whale*) and our responsibility to one another (Polyglot and Papermoon Puppet Theatre's *Cerita Anak* – which just had its 87th performance in Singapore and is next year off to the Lincoln Centre).

Cerita Anak arose out of ten year artistic collaboration between Polyglot and Papermoon Puppet Theatre and I came into the project right at the tail end in the lead up to its first season so I'm in no way claiming a key role in its success. It's definitely down to the richness of the cross-cultural collaboration that has imparted so many layers in the work. But one of these layers is definitely the racial dramaturgy of the casting: the fact that the boat is not split down the middle in a stark racialised/ national lines means it has a greater, more universal resonance and Sue Giles and I have spoken about the need to preserve that dramaturgy in the work in future iterations.

Some of the most meaningful moments of my career have been witnessing a class of Indigenous girls revel in seeing Chanella Macri and I – two women of colour – leading a performance of *Whale*; or traveling to Warnnambool with *Melbourne Talam* and seeing the one South Asian teenager in the audience nearly lose her mind and become totally inarticulate during the post show Q&A (as you often do when you're particularly passionate about something) because she had just seen herself and her lived experience represented on stage. Paul Rae and Abbey Victoria Trott refer to this interaction in their examination of *Melbourne Talam* in the paper, *Where do Tears Come From? Locating Impact*. They also chart the experience of young non-Indian audiences who were asked – and who were entirely capable of – extending themselves imaginatively to identify with characters who don't look like them. In exactly the same fashion as non-white Australian audiences are asked to do all the time in our theatres.

So when Christian Leavesley called me up in March last year and told me he wanted me to apply my brain to Dan Giovannoni's dramatisation of a story of the 1919 post-war *Air Race* from Hounslow to Darwin – a story peopled entirely by white men – because he wanted to reframe the authoring of and access to Australian grand narratives my response was, I believe, along the lines of "Fuck Yes"! Here's a shot of the actors that ultimately told that story – four actors (who were also all musicians and pretty well gymnasts), three women, two women of colour.

Theatre for young people is such an imaginatively free and hyper-creative space. I'd argue that the stories we produce for young people's consumption, the

plasticity of form and theme, almost mirrors young people's neuroplasticity. It is such a **missed opportunity** not to people this sector with bodies that mirror their society.

Because the reality is that despite increased plurality in our society, the polemic or drift in our national discourse around race and identity is, if anything, worse than it was in the 80s and 90s. The right to be a bigot is currently on its way being enshrined in our law under the guise of religious freedom and certain sectors of our migrant communities - refugees, South Sudanese community - are actively criminalized via mainstream media. In March of this year, an Australian citizen travelled to Christchurch and shot dead 51 people including toddlers and teenagers. He did so, because of the stories he was told about who this people are; stories that marginalised and othered them in our national narrative.

I said I wouldn't give the argument from social justice but ... I can't help making that point. We the people in this room determine who is included in the "we the people" of Australian storytelling.

So it is my hope that if I am indeed preaching to the choir, this keynote encourages you to pick up the hymnbook and start singing. Our better still, hand us - those currently absent from our collective act of storytelling - the microphone. It is **only together that we can decolonize and transform our theatres and screens** and ensure that the stories we deliver to our children are in vibrant technicolour.

Thank you.