

Keynote: Creative Convergence Overview

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Where do tears come from? And what do we do with them, or they with us, once they're out there in the world? During a workshop we conducted in 2015 to explore audience responses to the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) touring education show *I Call My Brothers* (2013), by Jonas Hassen Khemiri, a 15 year old student at a public school in regional Victoria said: "I don't know why I cried, but I did". This perplexed and perplexing line exemplifies some of the most compelling features of theatre for audiences in general and for young people in particular: powerful experiences for indeterminate reasons, invariably with multifarious results. The line also hints at the challenges and possibilities of researching theatre. The reason the student cried is clearly complex: at some level, it was just something that happened in the moment – a distinctive combination of who she was, what she was thinking and feeling, and what the performers were doing. But if we rewind the tapes on that moment where everything converged, we find an almost infinite number of lives in action, decisions being made, chance occurrences, and contributing social and environmental factors at work. And then on top of that is the not knowing itself – "*I don't know why I cried*". What the

performance *did* was at odds with what the audience member knew. There are always aspects of theatre that remain essentially unknowable to anyone.

Since that pilot workshop in 2015, we have been engaged in trying to understand, if not explain, how these different elements work together. In collaboration with a wide range of Partner Organisations – theatre companies Arena, HotHouse, Arthur, Bell Shakespeare and Melbourne Theatre Company, Geelong Performing Arts Centre, Creative Victoria, Regional Victoria and TNA – Rachel Fensham and I – along with Jen Beckett, Lynne Kent, and Abbie Trott, as well as Meg Upton, Septi Rito Tombe, Usha Natala and Nat Cutter, have been researching different aspects of theatre for and – albeit less so, with and by – people aged roughly 13-25 to look at the range of factors that influence theatre experiences, and to find ways of putting the resulting insights to use. This is very much a work in progress. But at this stage we wanted to work with one of our partners, Theatre Network Australia, to find an opportunity to bring what we have been doing into conversation with what you in the wider sector are already up to.

Picking up on a term we first heard being used by our Partners in Arena Theatre Company, our project is called ‘Creative Convergence’. The longer subtitle, for purposes of explaining ourselves to the Australia Research Council which gave us

some funding, is ‘Enhancing Impact in Regional Theatre for Young People.’

Today, we’re mainly focusing on the ‘young people’ part – next year, we’ll hold a regional event that looks more directly at geography.

We can explain the phrase ‘creative convergence’ – and we can keep thinking about that question of where tears, and indeed all the other things theatre stimulates, come from – by recognising three main sites of convergence: in the person, in media, and in organisations. In diverse ways, reflecting our partner organisations’ varied priorities and ways of operating, this is where we have focused our research efforts: we will touch on a few here to provide a snapshot of our project. In so doing, I hope we can give you a sense of the range and scope of what working in a university enables us to do that others might not have the resources for, while at the same time you will no doubt identify some of the limitations that come with our institutional location.

In thinking about the person, and guided by the complex and sometimes contradictory responses that youth audience members were reporting to us, we became interested in the term ‘affective impact.’ On the face of it, the phrase is contradictory. ‘Affect’ emphasises the embodied, fleeting and downright unruly dimensions of audience experience that many impact assessments appear to

disregard in favour of quantitative, explainable and actionable data. However, only the narrowest definitions of 'impact' could fail to register how deeply rooted in affective experience are those features of the theatrical event that are most transformative and intense or, conversely, boring or aggravating. It follows that a substantive understanding of 'impact' cannot be achieved without registering where and how 'affect' functions within the theatrical event, not least since the lives of young people can be equally characterized by the carefully prescribed criteria of academic success, and the emotionally challenging and often inchoate desire for self-discovery and self-definition.

One project we did to explore this involved what we called 'impact tracking.' Rather than doing 'after the fact' audience research to demonstrate the impact – or otherwise – of a particular performance along conventional lines, we wanted to know what this contentious term, 'impact', really meant for different people at different points in the process of creating, performing and watching a work.

'Impact' is not a word either theatre-makers or audiences actually use very much – but some version of what it describes is present throughout the production and reception of theatre.

So we spent time in the rehearsal room of Melbourne Theatre Company's 2017 education show *Melbourne Talam*, by Rashma M. Kalsie, looking at how the anticipation of audience impact guided the creative decision making process amongst director Petra Kalive, actors Sonya Soares, Rohan Mirchandaney and Sahil Saluja and other members of the team. We went out on the road with them on their regional tour, watching performances and interviewing them. And then, a few months later, we went to a number of schools and conducted drama workshops about being an audience member with students who had seen the show, exploring what they remembered, and what sense, at a distance, they were making of the performance, if at all, in their lives.

So many fascinating details arose out of this project: the ways in which the creative team addressed concerns over the cultural legibility of a play about three Indian migrants seeking to build a life in Melbourne; the answer found to this in dramaturgical rhythm, rather than meaning; the moment-by-moment responsiveness of the actors to audiences, and the performance-by-performance evolution of the emotional trajectory of the play, as traced in Stage Manager Lisette Drew's beautifully-written show reports; and regional audiences who struggled to recognise 'cultural difference' as we and the theatre-makers themselves had conceived it, but who identified with the characters because of

their own complex relations to a city like Melbourne, and a mutual reliance on the rhythms of the public transport system to access it.

More broadly, our research highlighted the integral role the actors played in enhancing the impact of *Melbourne Talam*: their critical perspectives on how the performance was being represented, their resourcefulness in shaping the play in rehearsal and performance, and their articulate engagement with audience members during post-show Q+As meant they played the project, rather than only the role. This in turn underscored the necessity of complex theatrical material: something that the creative team can engage with rigorously and expansively so as to ensure its integrity, and that audiences can find their own way into and through. The *Melbourne Talam* audience was looking to identify with characters, and were creative and open-minded in finding opportunities for doing so. But it was hard to predict exactly what they would find most powerful, and it may be the hallmark of a good production that this varies from performance to performance.

As we know, if theatre is one thing that might converge *on* the person in a distinctive and often intense way, then the vast majority of people – particularly younger people – are themselves participating in a wider network of interlinked technologies and information systems sometimes referred to as media

convergence. Traditionally, live theatre, happening right here, right now, is seen as being the opposite of digital media, which is distributed in space and time. But this is at best an over-simplification, and neither performances nor audiences can be understood if we do not think carefully about the role media play in their creation, interpretation, and increasingly in the experience itself.

There are many theatrical innovations that are utilising digital media, and we will hear about some today. At the same time, perhaps it is the case that theatre and digital media sit in a distinctive relationship to each other, which might be characterised by seamlessness in some areas, but resistances or latencies in others. Tracing some of those seams and testing the resistances has been a focus of our work with technology. Some of it is resolutely web 1.0. With the independent theatre company Arthur, for instance, we asked about the best way to create web resources to complement a touring show on the VCE playlist, and we created a website to explore that. With HotHouse, we have been asking similar questions about a website as a community resource: *At the Hip*, which Clancey will talk about later, was developed with Roslyn Oades and involved the production of large amounts of oral interviews and local historical research. Could such resources be made more durably available online? We've also explored the nuts and bolts of more interactive digital media: with Bell, we worked on an Instagram *Macbeth*

project in schools, and with the Melbourne Theatre Company we trialled post-show online Q+As – in a nutshell: use Instagram Stories. We’ve worked with Geelong Performing Arts Centre on their *Takeover* program, where school participants used theatre to explore the meanings of digital media in their lives. And recently, in collaboration with our colleagues in the physiology department and with Darius Kedros of Sonic State Design, we have begun working with Arena on exploring the implications of VR technologies – particularly the new, tetherless Oculus Quest – for theatre, particularly for theatre at a distance.

What all of this activity ultimately discloses and turns on is the remarkably complex ways in which young people in particular blend online identities, real lives and theatrical experiences. In some ways, theatre *does* still offer something of an alternative or a sanctuary from the endless jabber of ‘social.’ In other ways, social media is a lifeline for learning *about* theatre – witness, for instance, the high school student in Warnambool who is on Facebook only because she’s a theatre nut and that’s many theatre companies’ idea of social media. And in yet others, digital platforms offer a crucial mechanism for two-way and multi-player participation in theatrical worlds. Minimally, this might be about marketing. Usefully, it could involve education resources and a way of sustaining a relationship with artists at a distance over time. Ultimately, it opens up

performances for active participation: but not under any circumstances. The assumption that so-called 'digital natives' will participate in anything just because it's online or because it begins with the words 'insta', 'snap' or 'tik' overlooks the volume of demands on their attention, the level of discernment and curatorship they exercise in that domain, and the continuities with real world environments that can determine whether or not they feel confident or safe in participating. When we asked one of the high school students participating in the VR workshop at Arena where she'd be most comfortable having a VR theatre experience, she said: in a theatre.