

Editorial: Actor training in Australia

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The first AusAct: The Australian Actor Training Conference² (held in September 2018) that formed the basis of this special issue of *fusion journal* emerged as a result of discussions between colleagues in the Acting discipline at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. We were interested in the state of actor training in Australia and the most effective way to discuss this was to create a platform for practitioners, academics and pedagogues to celebrate, interrogate and showcase actor training methods that have been created and developed in Australia.

Performance practitioners, directors, teachers, academics, postgraduate students and performers were invited to attend to discuss and demonstrate their original pedagogies and methodologies that have been developed in Australia and that have been inspired by the environment, land, the Australian performing arts industry, the Australian values and culture. In general, presenters were encouraged to discuss the need for uniquely Australian performer training pedagogy, the link between Australian values and culture and actor training, the role that place, space, environment and land plays in the development of training methods, and finally, the involvement of technology in actor training.

Although original methods and approaches have been developed in Australia since the latter part of the 20th century, staples such as the Stanislavski Method, amongst many others, maintain a stronghold. American and European methods still take precedence in the industry. Private institutions and tertiary training institutions are capturing aspiring and established actors' interests by importing teachers from overseas, declaring their methods as being superior to ones developed and taught in Australia, allowing them to "tell us how it's done". Having said that, there is no such thing as a completely original method, as every system has influences that echo the ones before them, albeit in a more altered and sometimes advanced way in order to respond to contemporary needs of the performers and the industry. Interestingly enough, I have been told by overseas directors and teachers, particularly in the US as both a student and teacher, that although the systems and methods taught in Australia are borrowed, or directly taken from international methods, the outcome and overall aesthetic is vastly different due to the physicalities and the overall attitude of Australian actors. I have been told that Australian actors are physically free and less reserved.

The conference hosted 18 paper presentations, 12 of which have been published in this edition of *fusion journal*. The conference also included six workshops and two

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performances throughout the two days. Presenters discussed intercultural fusion, actors' health and wellbeing, place-based performance training, gendered casting and technology in actor training.

Elizabeth Blackwood, Lotte Latukefu and Mark Seton's article, *Actor Training in Portfolio Careers: Flourishing in a Creative Career Beyond "Luck"*, discusses existing research relating to the notion of student agency in designing a creative portfolio career versus the narrative of the lucky break so often associated with acting careers. The notion of preparing students for the industry versus artistic integrity is a complex one, and is sometimes challenging when designing and developing curriculum. Blackwood, Latukefu and Seton outline the process of review and design, underpinned by notions of portfolio training in a Bachelor of Dramatic Arts at a private higher education provider in Sydney. This industry-ready approach complements Jack Bradford's approach used in Brisbane Junior Theatre (BJT). Although quite dissimilar to Blackwood, Latukefu and Seton's example, Bradford provides a practitioner-led account on how to create sustainable, enduring and consistent theatre that draws upon BJT's 18-year experience as an Australian youth theatre. His article, *Brisbane Junior Theatre: A New Theatre Paradigm*, takes a detailed look at BJT's methodologies and intensive process and examines how it is able to succeed against the accepted theatrical norms of time and focus. Bradford also provides a possible model for future companies to emulate in order to answer the call for strengthening theatre in Australia.

Zac Bradford's article, *Vocal Resonance: Optimising Source-Filter Interactions in Voice Training*, aims to persuade the reader that understanding concepts related to vocal resonance can be advantageous to voice practitioners. Bradford hopes to convince any sceptics of its importance to reconsider and explore this topic further. James Harrison, who, like Bradford, is a graduate of the One Voice Centre in New York, is also a voice practitioner, however, his approach to voice and movement training blends martial arts training with conventional voice work. Harrison's article, *Within and Between: Integrative Performer Training and the Sword*, examines intercultural performance training concepts in order to develop strength, concentration and stamina by implementing key elements of Kendo. Pivotal to Harrison's work is the notion that increasing the demands placed on the muscles used for breath and subsequent vocalisation in a training environment prepares the performer for easier vocalisation in performance.

Integration has been somewhat of a buzzword in recent years, considering the implementation of various technologies and complementary and contradictory methods and approaches. Robert Lewis and Dominique Sweeney's article, *Perform "The Space", Not "In The Space": Incorporating Place, Environment and Imagination in Integrative Practices*, discusses how actors train to respond through an integrated awareness of personal space, body and voice, with place and architecture; a holistic approach to performance training that can integrate technology – as long as the primary element (that is, land, place and space) is acknowledged. Integrated exercises are designed to extend actors' imaginations through identification beyond the constraints of the human body through the exploration of shape, space, colour,

animals, elements, and natural and manufactured objects. Lewis and Sweeney's actor training research is located in the place and the instilled history or infused atmosphere and gives the method and the participant actors power and ownership of their work located in place. Nicole Stinton's article, *Monologuing the Music: A New Actor Training Practice for New Times*, discusses her holistic approach to enable students to rigorously explore *what* is being said, in terms of the verbal text, as much as *how* it is being said, that is, the musicality of the text, not only from a singing perspective, but an acting one. The aim for the future, according to Stinton, is to develop great actors who happen to sing really well, as opposed to actors who can sing, or singers who can act: in a sense, developing holistic performers.

At the other end of the technological spectrum, Shane Pike's article, *"Make it So...": Communal augmented reality and the future of theatre and performance*, discusses the evolution of Motion Capture into Performance Capture and argues the latter has not detracted from the art-form but worked to confirm the intrinsic necessity of the actor to screen-based performance. The future of live performance may lie in the hybridisation of the "real world" and the virtual world, and Pike delves into the idea that augmented reality technology complement live theatre and performance. Pike predicts that this technology will inspire the live performer to intensify their art-form and allow them to use advances in digital technologies to serve theatre as opposed to dominating it.

Andrew Lewis and Lyndall Adams's article, *Empowering the Next Generation of Actors through the Creation of Student-Centred Self-Devised Dramatic Work*, charts the development of original, devised dramatic work and the dynamics involved in theatre co-creation through student-centred collaboration. Lewis and Adams's research examines the existing pedagogical practices in the current Bachelor of Arts (Acting) course at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Lewis and Adams also explore prospective changes that may be implemented to the current curriculum, as they and their colleagues indicate room to enhance the program and encourage resilience in order to develop skills for creating their own original work. The focus shifts from devising to directing in Gabrielle Metcalf's article, *The Role of the Director in Australian Actor Training: An Exploration of Dialogic Leadership as a Pedagogical Practice for Australian Directors and Acting Teachers*. Metcalf introduces dialogic leadership as a pedagogical tool for directors and acting teachers. *Directing through dialogue* is the term Metcalf uses to describe a methodological approach to training actors that challenges the traditional hierarchical director-centred model and replaces it with an actor-centred, egalitarian model, and utilises coaching and feedback to facilitate growth and development in student actors.

Kim Durban's article, *"Had I Been There, Which I Am A Silly Woman": Dealing with Gendered Casting in an Australian Tertiary Setting*, charts some of the issues surrounding play selection and gendered casting throughout Durban's 18 years of working as an artistic director of actor training in the regional city of Ballarat, Victoria. Margaret of Anjou's reference to herself as a "silly woman" in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* is a political ploy to draw attention to her gender with apparent dismissiveness yet indicate her limitless power in the face of male dominance. The key focus within

Durban's investigation is the interrogation of the term "silly woman"; namely, what to do with women in actor training (who outnumber males in the application and audition process for drama school entry); women who, like Margaret, are talented, outspoken, able and self-aware, yet perhaps, like her, engaged in a somewhat treacherous game dominated by male forces. Durban states that it is a struggle to find a range of audition monologues for women in their late teens and early 20s (typically the age when students audition for university courses) where they are not portrayed as victims, love objects or followers rather than leaders.

Actors' health and wellbeing is also a relevant issue which was discussed widely throughout the conference, and continues to be a topic of discussion. Soseh Yekanians's article, *"When You Cry You Really Cry": Playing with Actors Emotions*, examines the changing responsibilities and realities of actor training in Australia in terms of Constantin Stanislavski's emotional recall, or "emotional memory". After spending years of examining the question of training actors to (re)produce authentic emotional performances on stage, while still allowing them to remain safe and psychologically detached from their "real-life" emotions, Yekanians has the confidence that the answer lies within the systematic "Effector Patterns of Emoting", an idea proposed by neuroscientist Dr Susana Bloch of the Institute of Neurosciences at the University of Pierre and Marie Curie in Paris. This approach asks that actors control their breath, posture and facial expressions to safely produce "real" emotions on stage via "the effector patterns of emoting" that already exist within their physiological make-up. This approach is less invasive than "emotional recall" and can be triggered and halted safely without any repercussions.

I would just like to end with an insightful quote from Terence Crawford's opening keynote address: "Acting must be joyful. Amateurs say 'good luck' to each other; professionals say 'have fun'. So have fun". How true is this. Some actors so often try to purge themselves in order to "lose themselves" in the role and the performance, or put themselves through gruelling processes as some sort of catharsis; that way, they feel justified and by inflicting some sort of pain or discomfort (without any proper guidance, training or support), they are "true" to the character, moment or intention of the playwright. Crawford continues by sharing a question he asks to his advanced students: "Was it fun?" ... If the answer is no, then one of two things is true: either you're still doing it wrong, or you shouldn't be doing it".

In closing, director and choreographer Jacqui Carroll, co-founder and director of Ozfrank Theatre, described in an interview conducted on 20 June 2018, the notion of Australian actor training through the lens of the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis:

we are Australians, essentially. We can't produce something that's 'other', what we're going to come through is something we as actors feel as required in the world we live in culturally, we want to bring together a whole bunch of things we've learnt, put it into a context which suits the people standing in front of us – Australian actors. They want something to stimulate them into what they're going to do. They're not going to turn into Japanese actors; they're going to become stimulated Australian actors. We need to hunt up within that training, we need to hunt up, devise

things that would satisfy that kind of hunger. And so, John [Nobbs] started looking at everything and started to work through a whole series of potentials.

About the editors

Dr Robert Lewis is a Lecturer in Acting and Course Director (Creative Industries) at Charles Sturt University and previously lectured in the Theatre Program at the University of Tasmania. He has studied theatre at UTAS, Honours at Monash University, Education at RMIT and Voice Studies at NIDA. His PhD focused on integrative practices and intercultural performance training aesthetics. He is a director, writer, theatre maker and voice and movement teacher. Robert has published theatre performances and training films through Contemporary Arts Media (Artfilms) and has published various academic articles on the subject of voice and movement integration. Robert is the founder of AusAct.

Zoë Hadler is an actor/writer who has been working in the arts since early childhood, working both on stage and backstage in multiple capacities. Her performance work includes *Killing Game* (2018), *Sanctuary* (2017), *DNA* (2016), and *Hairspray* (2013). Zoë completed a BA in Stage and Screen (Acting) in 2016 and has since taken on a Masters of Creative Practice, specialising in writing and performance, which has seen her perform her own work in showcases such as *Scratching the Surface* (2018) and as part of La Boite's Festival of Australian Student Theatre in 2018. Zoë was also a key research assistant for the inaugural AusSct Conference held on CSU Wagga's campus.

Jhi Rayner is an actor and director who is currently studying his Masters of Creative Practice at Charles Sturt University. Having come from an improvisational theatre games background, Jhi is always looking to explore how to best implement improvisation into his process as both an actor and a director. He hopes to create his own unique style and approach to the craft that he can use to create brand new Australian Theatre. Directing credits include *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett (2018), *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard (2017), and *Killing Game* by Eugene Ionesco (2018). Acting credits include Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (2015), Azdak in Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (2015) and Bob King in David Williamson's *Sanctuary* (2017).