# Community Engagement in Independent Performance-making in Australia: A case study of Rovers

## KATHRYN KELLY AND EMILY COLEMAN

*This article offers a perspective on strategies for community engagement by independent performance-makers and cultural institutions in Australia today. Beginning with an overview of community engagement in Australian performance, the article then describes a specific case-study drawn from personal practice: Belloo Creative's* Rovers *which was a new performance work based on the lives of its performers, Roxanne MacDonald and Barbara Lowing. As part of the production of* Rovers*, Belloo Creative, working with young Aboriginal artist Emily Coleman, trialled a community engagement project to welcome Aboriginal audiences to the 2018 Brisbane Festival. The article includes a personal reflection on* Rovers *that interleaves the commentary of Emily and Kathryn as the two artists who lead the community engagement project, and concludes by suggesting some key considerations for other independent companies who might wish to engage with community.*

## Community Engagement and Australian Performance

Community engagement is a broad term that embraces a diverse range of activities and practices across sectors and disciplines in contemporary Australia, as noted in the introduction for this special edition of *Social Alternatives*. Community engagement in the arts is broadly defined by the Australia Council, the national funding organisation for arts and culture, as covering:

> [A]ll the ways that artists and arts organisations can connect with communities. Engaging with a community is about creating a healthy and committed relationship between equals, based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Engaging with communities is a fluid activity which requires ongoing maintenance, communication and respect for the 'process' of working together (2014: 1).

Community engagement has been readily adopted as a term into the nomenclature of Australian performance, particularly in the last decade, by artists as well as our major cultural institutions. Indeed, the Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG), which is the peak body for Australia's largest cultural institutions, has reported a substantial overall increase in ancillary community participation projects in their venues and a doubling of engagement projects that target diverse communities since 2010 (2019). Public festivals have embraced participatory engagement projects, such as the work of the Queensland Music Festival (QMF) in regional Queensland across the last decade. QMF regularly commissions large-scale community engagement projects such as *Boomtown* in Gladstone in 2013, where a musical was co-created with the participation of 300 community members and performed to an audience of over 20,000 (Carter and Heim 2015: 202). Community engagement projects are also now routinely showcased within the major programs of city-based festivals, for example, The Good Room's *I've Been Meaning to Ask You*: a work created and performed by middle school children as part of the 2018 Brisbane Festival. While there are many factors accounting for the rise of community engagement in Australian performance, at the heart of this growth is the power of the word itself, which promises connection, collective endeavour and reciprocity without expectation. Engagement, unlike its sister word 'development', does not encode the expectation of a 'positive' outcome, however well-intentioned. The semantic openness of community engagement as a term suits the temporal and collaborative nature of performance-making (Schechner 2002: 2) and provides an opportunity for mutual exploration and learning between audiences and performance-makers outside the confines of traditional theatrical structures and conventions.

Community engagement can also function more problematically in public discourse. As Don Watson (2005: 1), iconoclastic Australian political speech-writer and author suggests, community engagement can be

characterised as a 'weasel' word – a term whose co-option by larger cultural institutions can be at odds with its decades-long traditions of civic revitalisation and bottom-up approaches (Head 2007: 441). The danger that Watson describes is a leaching of meaning and legitimacy:

> In *As You Like It*, Jacques says he can suck 'melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs'… [We] have sucked the meaning out of the words; and the result is just as melancholy. They are shells of words: words from which life has gone, facsimiles, frauds, corpses (Watson 2005: 1).

I suspect many creative practitioners in Australia have experienced this co-option – a community engagement process where a funding agency consults about an already decided policy; or when a theatre project claiming to be community-driven has pre-determined artistic or political agendas. Arts education academic Peter Wright, in a report documenting a collaboration with influential community arts company, BIG*h*ART also observes this weaselisation of language in the arts, where important terms for practice become 'ubiquitous … [and are] used in an uncritical way, and as if [the] descriptor has one single meaning to which everyone agrees' (2016: 11). The potential pollution of community engagement through its ubiquity is not a reason to reject it unquestioningly – here lessons can be taken from sectors outside the arts, such as community development and environmental science, who have been experimenting with participatory processes under the umbrella term of community engagement for longer. Curtis et al. suggest that:

> Critiques of community engagement are often misguided as they are frequently based on [observation of] inauthentic or poor engagement practices. Moreover, these critiques have often failed to grasp the nature of the problems being addressed, acknowledge the contributions of engagement or understand the importance of building adaptive capacity to respond to an increasingly complex and uncertain future (Curtis et al. 2014: 175).

What is needed, then, are accounts of community engagement that demonstrate the potential for authentic contribution to building adaptive capacity in an increasingly fragile and precarious performance-making sector (Kelly 2013: 85) and that shift monolithic interpretations of the term in public discourse into more nuanced and specific understandings. In essence, we need to snatch the term back from the jaws of 'weaselisation'. Part of doing this also involves an honest historicisation of community engagement in Australian performance to understand how it plays out, and at its best, reconciles, many of the longstanding tensions between traditions of community performance and our larger cultural institutions (Kelly 2017: 89).

## Tensions Between Community-based Practice and Mainstages in Australian Performance

Like many of the cultural traditions of the post-colonial settler cultures of Australia (Eckersall 2007: 287), performance – particularly in its most established institutional incarnation, the theatre company – is highly circumscribed by historical European theatre practices. Indeed, Kathryn Kelly's creative practice, dramaturgy, arose out of one of the very first experiments in community engagement undertaken by a European theatre institution, the Hamburg National Theatre in Germany, in 1767. Traditionally, theatre companies would communicate with their audiences outside of the theatre only by the daily posting of a flyer, nailed to the theatre door with the title of the play, the cast list and most importantly, the menu for the free buffet in the foyer! The Hamburg National Theatre's dramaturg, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, incidentally the founder of the profession of dramaturgy, initiated a radical broadening of communication with his theatre's audiences when he began a weekly publication of a pamphlet called *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (Hamburg Dramaturgies). Distributed across the city, the pamphlet was full of searingly honest critical commentary about the repertory of the theatre and the impact of its work on the broader cultural and political foment of enlightenment Germany, which was a divided culture both geographically and politically (Kelly 2017: 5). This influential publication led to the development of many of the instruments of communication between a theatre institution and its audience that we use today, including the theatrical program to accompany a performance, the notion of a curated season and the idea that it was incumbent on a theatre company to reach out as broadly as it could to recruit audiences. Lessing's Hamburg Dramaturgies extended the ambit of influence for the theatre company from just the performance event and its immediate audience to the whole community in which the company resided and emphasised its role in intervening in the urgent cultural and political agendas of the day (Kelly 2017: 6). Despite Lessing's radical intentions, his publication still emphasised the 'citadel' of the theatre company and the flow of information and expertise moved from this 'citadel' through the audience and into the broader community without a mechanism for return dialogue or reciprocity.

In Australian performance where the broader culture is often anti-intellectual, or at least suspicious of 'elites' (Hage 2000: 7), the very structures of these European theatre companies, imported into Australia across the early part of the twentieth century and cemented by

Atlee's notions of art for the common good through post-war welfare state (Kelly 2017: 26), create tension and complexity. The binary of 'elite' and 'popular' play out in very particular ways, containing the potential for both a self-consciously colonial 'disdain' for imported cultural formats and an internalised valorisation of them (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 6; McCallum 2009: 5). Much of the advancement of professional theatre practice in Australia was born out of these extremes. For example, Queensland was the only state in the country to create its publicly funded theatre company through an Act of Parliament as a statutory organisation. The Royal Queensland Theatre Company opened its inaugural season in 1969 with the canonical British playwright's account of the Portuguese colonisation of Peru, Peter Schaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. Five years later, in 1974, Queensland saw the birth of the most radical community theatre company in the country, the Popular Theatre Troupe, whose agit-prop work was delivered in *situ*, on work sites and off the back of trucks as it sought to fight against the limitations on civil liberties imposed by the incumbent Bjelke-Petersen State Government (Fotheringham 1987: 5). In Queensland, this meant that the institutions that were meant to personify professional practice and community practice were born in a particular cultural and political moment that set them in opposition to one another and created a relatively divided sector in terms of employment, expertise and mandate.

Charting the full relationship between traditions of community and mainstage theatre in Australia lies outside the scope of this article, beyond noting that the major cultural institutions have attracted a disproportionately high concentration of resources, particularly as a result of successive reviews and specialist funding arrangements across the late 1990s and 2000s (Craik 2007: 21). These occurred with once-a-decade peaks of investment outside the major cultural institutions in organisations that worked predominantly in community across the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Regardless of any ideological or practical judgements about this history, one of the implications is a relatively segregated sector. Historically, mainstage Australian theatre companies relied on fairly traditional modes of communication with their audiences not out of place with Lessing's first experimentations – artist-in-residence programs, regional touring, school education programs and youth outreach. In most cases, the 'expertise' remained within the 'citadel' of the institution and the major site of artistic work was still within the walls of the theatre venue, most of which were based in capital cities. Community engagement was often conflated with audience engagement and the flow of communication was still directed outwards with very little opportunity for return dialogue or reciprocity. The goodwill of individual practitioners working within these institutions can not be underestimated, however, even when innovative development or outreach programs began, they were often 'one-off' initiatives, secured by project funding or philanthropy rather than the core funding of mainstage institutions and therefore not driven by the core mandate of those companies (Kelly 2013: 83).

Meanwhile, professional practices developed outside our major cultural institutions that were shaped solely around working in community, for community and by community, and whose forays into the mainstages and major institutional structures were peripatetic (Fotheringham 1987). The separation of expertise persisted into the 1990s, with new generations of practice specialities, for example, community cultural development and youth arts, inspired by community development methodology and experiments in radical theatre praxis from those seminal community theatre companies in the 1970s and Australia's long history of radical artistic practice (Madyaningrum 2001: 3). Consequently, local performers and creatives might go for decades working exclusively on mainstages or *vice versa*. This is certainly the case with the two performers in *Rovers*, Roxanne MacDonald and Barbara Lowing, who, despite illustrious careers on Australian mainstages and the Aboriginal Theatre movement, had to wait over twenty years to be reunited onstage in 2018.

### Aboriginal Theatre Movement

This binary of 'elite' and 'popular' also impacted the trajectory of the vibrant Aboriginal Theatre movement, which surged in the 1970s with the founding of Ninethana in 1972 by Bob Maza and Jack Charles and the subsequent co-founding of The National Black Theatre in 1974 in Redfern by Maza and Aileen Corpus, Bindi Williams, Zac Martin and Gary Foley (Potts 2016). The tensions between the performance traditions associated with theatrical institutions and community practice created a double dispossession of Aboriginal Australia's performance traditions – marginalised from the Anglophile repertories of the mainstage theatre companies and then bundled into a catch-all category of community practice that was historically vulnerable to precarious funding but also not necessarily equipped to engage with the formidable weight of Aboriginal performance traditions and cultural practices. When the Aboriginal Theatre movement surged again in the 1990s, fuelled by the political and cultures changes of that decade and a new generation of remarkably talented Aboriginal practitioners, like Queensland's Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, many of those initial collaborations were shoe-horned into European institutional theatre models, like Enoch and Mailman's company, Kooemba Jdarra, which was founded in 1993 but subsequently defunded within a decade. Again, the full discussion of this performance history lies outside of the scope of the article, but it is worthwhile to contrast the history of Kooemba Jdarra with Aboriginal cultural institutions that were built around family

and relationship structures, like Ilbijerri in Melbourne which has seen a decades-long commitment from the Maza family. Ilbijerri has not just survived the vagaries of funding, but has flourished. As Aboriginal cultural leader Alethea Beetson argued, it is because this is a 'sovereign-based' company, controlled by Aboriginal people (Beetson 2018). Ilbijerri has blazed the way in shifting previously intractable binaries like community versus professional by establishing major cultural institutions and theatre companies that are intensely engaged in community *and* producing world-class repertoire, showing the important contribution of Aboriginal knowledge frameworks to the Australian performance sector.

Indeed, the traceline of this contribution can be seen even on the mainstages when, in 2010, Wesley Enoch was appointed as the first Aboriginal Artistic Director of a mainstage theatre company in Australia, The Queensland Theatre Company, which was no longer royal, but still solidly bound by statutory authority status. Indeed, the impacts of cultural resurgence, identity politics, globalisation and rapid technological growth in the new millennium seem to have shifted many of the previously intractable patterns in Australian performance, hand in glove with the rise of post-dramatic performance and the overall decline in funding for all parts of the Australian performance sector (Kelly 2013). This has forced many Australian mainstage theatre companies and cultural institutions to seek new ways to engage with the community beyond the old 'citadel' models, in order to grow new audiences and to adapt to a broader culture that is changing rapidly.

> I think the days of the arts in ivory towers are behind us; the very best arts organi[s]ations are … connecting communities with artists … Not only can the arts build communities, I think we must (Landesman in Borwick 2012: 2).

This is not to pretend that the underlying cultural and economic pressures that created the tensions between community and mainstage practice and institutions do not still exist. The enduring bipartisan commitment to hands-off funding via the Australia Council was dismantled by the Federal Government in 2015 without notice, and while a substantial proportion of that funding has been returned, the climate for arts and cultural funding is one of decline and intense competition, particularly between the larger and smaller cultural institutions.

These longstanding and seemingly intractable post-colonial binaries are such tempting invitations, as they allow us (academic, practitioner, policy maker or artist) to pick a side and to fight for the success of one half of the equation without considering the cost to the other.

The danger of thinking in these binaries is that it stymies the potential for innovation through collaboration and partnership and it ignores our overall mutual dependence and participation in an Australian performance sector marked by increasing scarcity and precariousness. As noted, Aboriginal knowledge frameworks provide one insight into possible models of innovation, but significantly, so does the rise of community engagement and its power as a term that resists easy categorisation into a binary relationship – the 'other' of the mainstage and *vice versa*; or the specialisation of the artist that might result in professional ghettoisation. Community engagement is available to any kind of artist, institution or policy setting and most importantly, it takes its place in our nomenclature as a broad term that can describe a much more diverse range of partnerships and situations inside and outside of our sector, linking to traditions of socially engaged work across all fields and economies. The challenge, as outlined earlier, is to imbue the term with specific and authentic examples in the public discourse and to work, as the Australia Council suggests, with respect, reciprocity and a commitment to fluid and ongoing 'process.

## Case Study Context: Australian independent theatre, community engagement and *Rovers*

As noted earlier, the millennium has brought a number of changes to Australian performance, including the rise of the independent sector as many of the traditional structures for making work fractured (Kelly 2013) and incomes for artists steadily diminished (Throsby and Peteskaya 2017: 2) due to reduced numbers of professional productions (Meyrick 2005: 3) and the festivalisation of much of the production of new cultural content in Australia. As Brauneck claims:

> Independent theatre takes place outside the established institutions, the repertory theatre, or as Otto Brahn called them, the 'permanent stages'. It emerged as an alternative and in opposition to such theatres … [I]t always calls for contemporaneity and explores new paths, even transcending boundaries and conventions (2017: 13).

There is now an ecology of small theatre companies and collectives nationally that work professionally, but are not operationally funded. They move across and between the different major cultural institutions, sometimes across art forms and often produce new work that is then subsequently programmed by the mainstage or major cultural institutions, including festivals and major venues. In Queensland, perhaps because of the fecund tradition of community arts, community cultural development and youth arts, and the rich inter-cultural and physical theatre traditions there is a strong community of independent artists and companies that

have completely collapsed the binary between 'elite' and 'community' by making professional work, often for large cultural institutions with community as cast, creative and audience simultaneously, dissolving traditional theatrical hierarchies and conventions. This includes companies like The Good Room, The Walking Neighbourhood, Motherboard Productions, Debase and Belloo Creative. The next section of the article will shift into a case study analysis of Belloo Creative's *Rovers* which provides a personally-inflected case study of community engagement undertaken by myself and Aboriginal cultural consultant and emerging artist Emily Coleman.

## Which Way? This Way? That Way? The Case Study of Belloo Creative's *Rovers*

Belloo Creative is an award-winning all-female theatre company, with playwright and co-artistic director Katherine Lyall-Watson, director and co-artistic director, Caroline Dunphy, producer Danielle Shankey and and Kathryn Kelly as company dramaturg. Founded in 2013, Belloo's mandate is to bring stories and people 'out of the shadows' and our work is often inter-cultural and based on true stories. *Rovers* was Belloo's third production and arose from a desire to make a new work for associated Belloo performer, Barbara Lowing. Barbara is an extraordinary actor, beloved by colleagues and admired for her emotive vocal technique and onstage charisma. However, like many actors who have chosen to stay in the sector into their middle and later decades, she was facing long stretches of unemployment due to structural disadvantages outside of her control – the diminishing repertory for older female performers, the impact of long-term casual work, caring responsibilities and rising costs of living. Barbara is also a performer who loves touring. In 2017, Katherine Lyall-Watson, Belloo's playwright, proposed a project to develop a small cast touring show and potentially a financial vehicle for Barbara – a new play drawn from her life. Within the same week of beginning the interviews for the play, Belloo director Caroline Dunphy connected with an old friend Roxanne MacDonald at the launch of a shared film project. Caroline was shocked that Roxanne, whose luminous face had inspired a generation of Murri and non-Murri performers in Queensland, was working as a security guard at a hospital at night, walking over twenty kilometres each shift. Just before Caroline and Roxanne were thrown out of the launch, the last two people talking, their conversation touched on Barbara. Roxanne related an old yarn; she and Barbara had last done a show together in the mid-1990s, an iconic Mabo inspired revamp of The *Taming of the Shrew*, which saw them tour Central Australia together, visiting Uluru and eating oysters late at night in their hotel room in Alice Springs. The reminiscence lit up the evening. So, divine accident or fate, it was a portent for Caroline, who could see a show for Belloo that re-united these two powerful women who had both made such important and unsung

contributions to the life of the local theatrical community. *Rovers* was born. Part verbatim, part fictive memory, *Rovers* draws on feminist tropes of the road movie and the notion of the 'wild woman' to celebrate the power of these two extraordinary performers. Through their ancestral memories, *Rovers* explores Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experiences of colonisation, reconciliation, memory and aging. Rovers was programmed by Northern Rivers Performing Arts in Lismore in late 2017 and then built momentum quickly over a year, with a short reading at a Belloo International Women's Day event in March 2018 at Queensland Theatre and a longer showing as part of the Commonwealth Games Indigenous Arts Festival in Brisbane. After seeing the showing, the Brisbane Festival programmed the work for inclusion as part of the Theatre Republic in September 2018. As part of those negotiations with the Brisbane Festival Belloo producer, Danielle Shankey requested that a substantial tranche of free tickets be set aside for Aboriginal community members. This was a potentially risky request as the power of the large cultural institutions in these negotiations can be decidedly one-way. But, for all of the artists involved, it seemed unbearable to finally re-unite these women onstage and to not reunite their audiences and communities as well. Ethically, it was incumbent on us as a theatre company trying to make respectful intercultural work to also ensure an intercultural audience for that work.

## Relational Interculturalism: A personal reflection by Emily Coleman and Kathryn Kelly on the community engagement in *Rovers*

*Rovers* became an inter-cultural work through relationships and serendipity. Working from and through relationships became the defining principle of the project. Surprisingly to us, but certainly not when you contextualise the rapid changes to Australian performance in the last two decades, the Brisbane Festival were delighted with the proposal and generously offered not just the release of tickets, but an opportunity to work with their Indigenous Advisory Committee and the dedicated producer who supported it. Their only request was that the project try to collect the contact details of the invitees for their official database. Belloo was able to secure a small grant from the Brisbane City Council to employ an artist who could reach out to Aboriginal community members, invite them, provide assistance with transport and welcome them to the space, hopefully making it more culturally safe. We reached out through our existing relationships to a young artist already known to the company, Emily Coleman, who is a very proud Bundjalung Githabul woman, from a long line of storytellers. Emily is an emerging creative artist working in Brisbane whose work focuses on a commitment to Indigenous storytelling and cultural integration. Emily and I, mirroring Barbara and Roxanne, set about trying to work out how best to plan and implement this modest community engagement project. Emily undertook all the

liaison with the local Aboriginal community and managed the ticket allocation and we worked together on liaison with the Festival and supported each other where needed. For both of us, our lodestar through the whole two months of the project was the 8ways model (8ways 2018), an Aboriginal pedagogical knowledge framework which is open source and available online. I offer a quote from one of the key facilitators and advocates of the 8ways project, Tyson Yungaporta:

> The element of 'Community Links' is now understood by more practitioners in terms of Aboriginal relationships with both insiders and outsiders, and the centrality of these relationships to the development and acquisition of all knowledge. We know that any learning (or program, or policy) that fails to connect to this system of relationships will ultimately fail (2018).

Emily and I felt it important to include both of our voices in the reflection in dialogue with each other, much as we had while we worked on the project together. I turn to her now for her perspective:

**Emily:** I believe the most beneficial step in the Rover's Community Engagement project was when we built Community Links through 'Story Sharing' and 'Land links'. By sharing who I am, and where my family are from, I was able to contextualise my place in the community to our invited guests, which I believe clarified any potential preconceptions.

**Kathryn:** We started with a meeting with our wonderful cultural consultant, Nadine MacDonald Dowd, who explained to us the importance of inviting elders and building one-on-one relationships with them. But where to begin?

**Emily:** Finding significant community members, particularly Elders, proved challenging. We wanted to be able to include as many Indigenous community members as we could, which meant reaching far beyond our personal networks. The process of deciding who to contact and how to reach them took longer than we initially anticipated because we struggled to find out who should be invited. We had a list of invitees which was built largely from Aunty Rox's family contacts, however, there was very little need for the Community Engagement team to contact them directly. One of the first steps in the process was to make contact with the Brisbane Festival team and Indigenous Advisory Group Chair. They had a 'database' of names which we may have been able to gain access to. However, it quickly became apparent that the list would not be made available to the *Rover's* team, for several reasons. Most significantly, the list was

not up to date, which meant we may have been making attempts to contact people who were not in a state where they would be able to attend or contacting people who are no longer with us. In either case, I felt it would have been disrespectful to cold call any of the contacts on the list before it had been thoroughly checked and updated.

**Kathryn:** After a wonderful lunch with the Brisbane Festival producer and IAG Chair, although we couldn't proceed with using their database, we were given a formal introduction to an elder connected to the Brisbane Festival, Aunty Melita Orcher, who recorded an Acknowledgement of Country for us which is incorporated into the first moments of *Rovers.*

**Emily:** Once a relationship was established with Aunty Melita Orcher and her Cherbourg Dormitory sisters (Aunty Estelle and Aunty Bernie), they were happy to share their contacts with us, and invite other community members to the show. Initially, we found ourselves scrambling for contacts, however once we made familiar connections and community links, we ended up with a sizable list. We found the best way was to casually approach the guests we already had about any significant community members they thought might be interested. We invited several Elders and younger community members but didn't want to make anyone feel pressured to attend the show.

**Kathryn:** Indeed, one of the important moments for Emily and me, and the point at which it seemed we went from a few community members invited to over-subscription was when we decided that we wouldn't ask people to share their contact details for the Brisbane Festival. The chain of relationship was strong when it was passed from one person in dialogue to another, but anything else was inappropriate. It became really clear to Belloo that any sort of 'database' was such a 'European' idea of how a theatre company must communicate into community. It was our relationship to Emily that was important and hers with those community members and it would be maintaining both of those webs of relationships that would enable us to build an ongoing connection. Emily worked for us again on our next show, *SAND*, and she holds our community engagement capacity and expertise.

**Emily:** *Rover's* Community Engagement is an example of how a theatre company can invite Indigenous people into the space, but also invite their input, which, in turn, fosters knowledge transference and cultural integration. Martin Nakata discusses the idea of 'The Cultural Interface'; he suggests that this interface is the cross section of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people and describes it as: 'a place of constant tension and negotiation of different interests' (2002: 6). Despite the tension within the space, it's a way for us to explore future learning

and understanding. This interface is a vital part of conversations and connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Richard Walley says: 'Knowledge is the one thing which will break down barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (Walley in Casey 2004: 174). During the hour before the show, our invited guests had the chance to sit and enjoy Theatre Republic, where they could grab a drink and have a yarn. In these pre-show gatherings, there were several moments of 'The Cultural Interface'. The aunties sat with a group of younger attendees from a range of backgrounds and shared stories with them. These casual, unplanned moments were where I saw the most significant examples of community engagement throughout the entire process. They were moments of genuine trans-generational, multicultural storytelling and knowledge sharing within one diverse community.

**Kathryn:** The season of *Rovers* was a joyous experience for us with the show opening to a diverse audience that could interpret the work's full range of potential cultural meanings, languages and ancestral histories. Playwright Katherine Lyall-Watson had been nervous about how her consultative writing about Roxanne's life and stories would be received:

> While I knew that Roxy was comfortable with what I'd written, I had no idea how it would come across to other Indigenous people and whether Roxy talking about her deceased grandmother on stage would be offensive to any audiences. We were walking a fine line and it was important to bring in the community and hear from them so that we could know what worked and what didn't work and address any inadvertent errors in an open and respectful fashion. Welcoming Indigenous people into the space and giving them places of honour in the audience where they could chat to Roxy before the show was part of this process. Talking afterwards and being open to their feedback was another part. For me, we have taken the first steps in engaging with First Australians – but there is a long way still to go. I was heartened by the elders who saw *Rovers* and told us that they'd like to share their own stories, too. Finding a way to respectfully hear what they want to say without appropriating it, feels like an important next step (2018).

**Emily:** The biggest challenge for me was the concept of integrating traditional European theatre practices and processes with my own understanding of cultural knowledge practices and maintaining respect for my Elders. I found that when I connected with Elders, I needed to have a sense of familiarity, and uphold a very casual tone. However, when I connected with

professionals within the Brisbane Festival team, I took on a more 'professional persona' which further highlighted the disparity between the Indigenous community and current institutional practices. As this was a pilot project for community engagement and cultural integration, the *Rover's* Team and Belloo Creative did their best with the available knowledge at the time. This project was a major learning curve for all parties involved. Anyone wanting to undertake a cultural integration or community engagement project with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities needs to first build a relationship with community members while maintaining complete transparency, and with the highest level of respect, for the people and their cultural practices. You need to be willing to take a step away from the traditional European theatre practices and values that many popular institutions abide by (for example, you may not be able to connect via email). Although it seems very simple, it affects the type of connection you want to build with the community. A suggested first step would be to review the 8ways to develop a degree of Indigenous cultural competence.

## Belloo Creative's Learnings from *Rovers*

Emily's sister and brother-in-law filmed audiences and took 'vox pops' after *Rovers* with the responses from audiences being joyful and heartwarming. Audience members mingled in the space afterwards, chatting and talking and waiting for both performers to come out, often to a round of applause. The reviews caught this feeling of engaging with important issues with heart and storytelling:

> Belloo Creative is continuing their streak of developing outstanding shows. They've brought us a production that celebrates women without alienating men. They've delivered a performance with diversity that isn't tokenistic or patronising. They discuss serious and important concepts without lecturing or depressing. This is a cast and crew delivering state of the art theatre. It's a standard to which other productions can aspire (McCauley 2018).

Aunty Melita came back to see the show again and the feedback from the Aboriginal audience members was that they felt genuinely welcomed and safe. And yet, there was a sense that while the two communities shared the space comfortably, they did not necessarily interact. My reflections, my 'Deconstruct / Reconstruct' to return to the 8ways model, makes me wonder if we need to do more to enable dialogue between the communities in the audience. What is our responsibility having brought them together? If the communities are still divided then is it tokenism? Does it begin to veer towards Watson's critique of 'wealisation'? There is discussion of a national tour for *Rovers* in 2020 and these questions will be the

challenge for Emily and Belloo. Is there a way to provide invitation, welcome, cultural safety and extend that into cultural dialogue? Overall, the community engagement project has been an immensely rich experience for Belloo Creative and can now be incorporated into our making processes as a routine and joyful part of developing a new Australian performance work. We offer our learnings up for other independent companies that might wish to embark on this journey:

• Don't be afraid to ask. Know what you want. Think about what your responsibilities are.

• Leverage at the point of programming by asking for First Nations access.

• The engagement expertise (historically) is likely to be outside of a major institution but the bulk of the resource (historically) is likely to be inside – look to maximise both through partnership.

• Chase targeted resources. For a major cultural institution a small grant is inefficient, but it can be catalytic for an independent company.

• Try to use a relationally connected Indigenous Knowledge framework for which you have permission.

• Take action and move through relationships, not timelines or processes.

• Meet face to face if you can, then via phone and email.

• Perhaps you won't get a 'no', but rather no response. This is probably because you haven't asked respectfully or shouldn't have asked.

• Try and avoid Western frames that involve and encode time and linear structure, for example, databases!

• Try and see your context through Indigenous eyes or knowledge.

• Ask on whose land and through whose relationships your show is occurring.

• Continually reflect.

• Scarcity is no justification for inaction. Small is powerful. Relationships are all. We can always do better. We will always fail. We are better together.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Rovers* provides an authentic case study of partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal theatre-makers. The production demonstrates the potential for community engagement by independent theatre-makers in partnership with mainstage institutions. Further, it also demonstrates the continuing contribution of Indigenous knowledge frameworks to Australian performance.



Above image one: Poster Image of *Rovers* with Barb Lowing and Roxanne MacDonald. Credit: Cinnamon Watson.

Next page top right, Image two: Image from the Brisbane Festival season of *Rovers*. Credit: Joseph Lynch.

Next page bottom right, Image three: Image from the Brisbane Festival season of *Rovers*. Credit: Kate Holmes.

### Live at the Pt Chev RSA

the ramps are there so the truly
elderly may enter with dignity

none of the pokies installed
for the inverately hopeful notices age

and there's a veranda
where survivors of all the health warnings

smoke in the peace earned for them
by long departed soldiers

the reliably straightforward kitchen menu
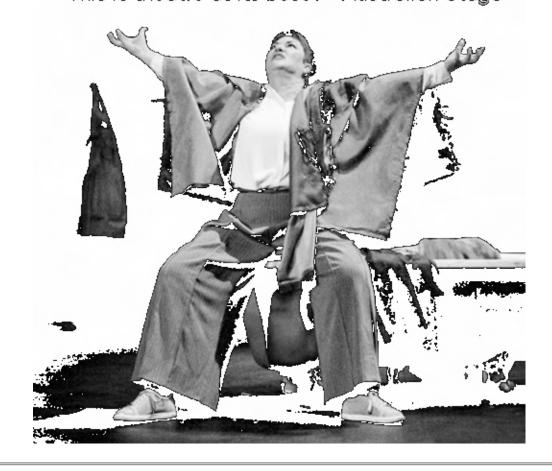doesn't require glasses or reading

advanced years are no joke but can be funny
when wires are crossed identities mistaken

and the karaoke machine at full volume
reinvents another place and time

*TONY BEYER,*
*TARANAKI, N.Z.*

"audience imaginations are invigorated and inspired"
– Blue Curtain Brisbane

"This is theatre at its best". – Australian Stage

"Buckets of charisma and soul."
– Stage Whispers

Image four: Image from the Brisbane Festival season of *Rovers*. Credit Joseph Lynch.



Image five: Image from community engagement project, *Rovers* opening night with Aunty Melita Orcher, Kath Kelly, Cinnamon Watson, Aunty Estelle, Emily Coleman, Aunty Berenice and Danielle Shankey. Credit Joseph Lynch.

Image six:   Image from community engagement project for *Rovers* with unknown, Nadine MacDonald Dowd, Katherine Lyall-Watson and Danielle Shankey. Credit Joseph Lynch.

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## Authors

Dr Kathryn Kelly is a dramaturg, theatre historian and critic and she is currently a Lecturer at Queensland University of Technology in Performance. She completed her PhD on the pedagogy of dramaturgy in 2017 and has taught extensively in the last seven years at institutions including the University of Queensland, Western Australian Academy for the Performing Arts (WAAPA), Flinders University, Griffith University, and Southbank Institute of Technology. Her publications include a history of Australian dramaturgy 2000-2010 in *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s* (Australian Theatre Series, Bril) as well as with the *Australasian Drama Studies* journal and various industry journals. Kathryn was a critic with *Realtime* and contributor to the *Fanciful Fiction Auxiliary*. She is currently company dramaturg with award-winning, all-female theatre company, Belloo Creative, who are the Company in Residence at Queensland Theatre. Her dramaturgy practice is in text-based theatre, dance and contemporary performance. She has worked for every major festival and theatre company in Queensland; nationally for Theatreworks (Melbourne); Malthouse (Melbourne); Playwriting Australia (Sydney) and the Darwin Writers Centre and internationally for the Factory Theatre and Cahoots Theatre Projects in Toronto, Canada. Formerly, she has worked as CEO of Playlab (2004-2008), Australia's second largest theatrical publisher and as Resident Artist for World Interplay, the largest festival for young playwrights in the world. She has also worked for Arts Queensland and other arts organisations in her twenty-five years in the performance sector.

Emily Coleman is an emerging Indigenous creative artist working in Brisbane. She has recently completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Drama) at Queensland University of Technology. Her work has and continues to hold a focused commitment to Indigenous storytelling and cultural integration. She has worked as a performer with Ngarrama Productions, located in the Hunter Region of New South Wales, and with them has toured a show to various remote Indigenous communities around Australia. She is a very proud Bundjalung Githabul woman and is from a long line of storytellers. Her goal is to work closely with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative artists to generate work that speaks from the perspective of Indigenous people. She draws inspiration from personal experiences and the stories of her community to create work that engages with the broader Indigenous community. Within her practice, she is working towards making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories and voices more prominent and accessible in Australian theatre.

**Oppositions**

Morning is the opposite of this under-utilized office,
stale fluorescence that fails to light up the space.

The music breaks, my in-ear headphones are the opposite
of silence—I hear my swallowed spit, or did someone just speak?

Cold tea, scattered pencils, books erect like monuments,
a clock's composure—opposites of living in the moment.

I want the chair to spin, roll across the room, clash
with the wall. I want the paperclips to fight.

If someone barged in, pulled out a knife,
I'd stay put and try to communicate.

To pit one against the other is a way of finding company,
the drama between A and B, their melodrama with Y and Z.

The opposite of *this* is not *that*, but the absence of *this*—
how a friend was with me, then no longer is, and I don't want any substitutes.

MARCO YAN,
HONG KONG