

Good morning. Yes I am Kristine Landon-Smith and I am a Lecturer here at NIDA teaching with an intracultural theatre practice approach which I will touch on later. In my role I also look at how to sustain and enhance the diversity of our student body and I am currently working with Anna Messeritti whom some of you may know on a research project around how to best support the diversity of the cohort and ensure best practice. I came to NIDA three years ago from the UK where I was running a BAME performing arts organization. BAME stands for Black Asian Minority Ethnic and is currently the terminology used to describe people of non white descent in the UK. So working in the BAME sector for most of my career my experience has been in cultural diversity and this is what I will be mainly focusing on here.

So it's an interesting time to be asked to speak about diversity. With no nominations for black actors at this year's Oscars and no nominations from the plethora of work from the range of diverse artists in Western Sydney in this years Theatre Awards in Sydney, social media has gone crazy and the spotlight on diversity is not going away. It started with a hashtag : #OscarsSoWhite campaign and has turned into a juggernaut says Philippa Hawker in the Sydney Morning Herald. The hashtag was started by April Reign managing editor of theatre website BroadwayBlack.com and she emphasizes that "The point of #OscarsSoWhite is not that there needs to be a person of colour in every category but to ensure that the best and brightest are given the opportunity to audition , write and direct".

Idris Elba widely tipped for best supporting actor Oscar nomination for his role in Beasts of No Nation accelerated the juggernaut by addressing the British Parliament on diversity emphasizing the same point : that "talent is everywhere, opportunity is not". So in this moment where the Oscars fiasco has prompted a call to action I have been glued to social media to help me understand how people are feeling and also to learn more widely where there is provision and where there is not.

Darren Dale Managing Director and Producer of Blackfella Films with successes such as First Australians, Mabo, The Tall Man, Redfern Now and many others can see how it can work – he has developed business models which have flourished because of support given to Indigenous filmmaking by the SBS and ABC. He looks at diasporic heritage film makers : Indian Australian, Chinese Australian, Lebanese Australian, Greek Australian - and makes the comment " these artists and communities would be thinking where are we represented? – it's a reasonable question – there is a healthy expectation that you should see yourself on screen".

Fiona Cameron from Screen Australia says that the bi-partisan support to Indigenous filmmaking has done extraordinary things and that it is visible from the work created to the development of a community of artists, to the growth of an audience for the work.

My own work at Tamasha, the theatre company I co-founded in the UK set up to bring stories of the Asian diaspora to the British stage mirrors these sentiments.

We were a tiny company surviving on not much and if it was not from small but **consistent** investment and advice from funding bodies and unfailing support from a few key mainstream producing houses we would not have achieved what we did in our 25 year history. And like Fiona from Screen Australia, I would say that on relatively minimal support we achieved extraordinary results : we developed a community of artists, a new canon of work and an audience for that work . But it took 25 years and demanded day in day out commitment and attention.

I think that the creative exploration and expression of cultural diversity inevitably sits in the domain of the smaller, less established arts organisations. Many will be set up specifically to address the dearth of particular stories being told on our stages and screens (as my company did) and in the telling of a range of alternative stories these companies become laboratories for new and innovative work.

Small to medium art companies have an important role to play. Through a clarity of purpose and consistent and sustained intracultural dialogue and practice well-targeted programs across the variety of art forms can be more important than large-scale initiatives as these projects can start to build a scaffolding and infrastructure which is so critical in the survival of any artistic endeavour. Supporting emerging artists can generate ripple effects to show that truly relevant and energetic creative art will come from working across cultures.

However with recent funding cuts smaller organisations and independent projects have suffered and as cultural leaders we are going to have to be broad in our thinking to ensure that a solid framework can be urgently developed to support the plurality of voices needing to be heard.

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams describes culture as the “deep personal meanings... the special processes of discovery and creative effort... the way in which people write themselves into the land.”

As an artist who is constantly thinking about the relationship between culture and society I constantly reflect on how can we support each and every narrative and cultural wisdom being written into the artistic landscape. Beyond excellent business models and consistent support from the centre what will it really take for this long term project to be a success.

Artistic practice occurs within a range of art circles : mainstream, community, amateur, avant-garde – a range of circles with invisible barriers between them. In my own work telling stories of the Asian diaspora with predominantly British Asian actors which in the early days sat outside the mainstream I could never escape the subtext in the minds of the gatekeepers – “this is community theatre and therefore is not part of the theatre community.” So how do artists from marginalized communities fully gain access to creative arts communities?

Like it or not we have to accept and begin to understand with our minds and our hearts that many communities suffer from cultural neglect. I first heard this term

cultural neglect from a British Caribbean colleague of mine when describing the moment she first saw a film that had a likeness with her own experience. The film was *Looking for Langston*, an exploration of the life and consequences of the late African-American poet Langston Hughes set between the 1920's and 1930's, the time of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary, artistic and intellectual movement that kindled a new black cultural identity. She was seventeen and it was a bitter sweet moment for her because in that instant she realized she *could* be part of the epic public imagination, that the public imagination *could* include histories and stories like hers. She also realized that prior to that moment she had been on the outside looking in.

The definition of neglect from the National Adult Protection Society in the States is : a form of mistreatment resulting from inadequate attention especially through carelessness or disregard. My colleague talks about how cultural neglect does not come from maliciousness but from carelessness and how in many organisations that she worked for this is how she often felt : cared for less

Cultural neglect manifests itself in a number of ways:

- When the culture you live in does not recognise your cultural heritage and your cultural wisdom
- When the cultural forms around you from advertising to billboards to tv documentaries, radio dramas don't represent anyone like you
- When you go to a cultural space and you are the only one like you in that space
- When your own cultural memories and wisdoms are not represented in the place that you work especially if that is a cultural institution
- When the active level of financial investment and engagement in your own cultural experience is minimised

I don't think there is any cultural leader who is not interested in diversity. There may be unconscious bias, lack of understanding and even knowhow but as cultural leaders it must be our responsibility to lead the way in allaying the fear that surrounds diversity and show courage in coming up with new ways of thinking around an old problem : how to harness and allow artists to express the complexity of multifarious identity at one of the most difficult times in history .

So what to do: The Oscars have responded swiftly to the controversy in its backyard pledging to double the number of female and minority members by 2020 and to diversify its leadership immediately by adding three new seats to its board of governors. The Academy President Cheryl Boone Isaacs forecasts that a recasting in the composition of the membership will have a dramatic impact. So I guess a key message in this for me is about learning to embrace creative abrasion. Hiring people who think differently realizing that it is difference at the heart that makes for an innovative organization.

Where we have some influence I believe it is our responsibility to shape pathways . And its not a quick fix, it's a process, a long process. Theatre and broadcasting is a closed system – many systems are closed – we are not unusual

in that but as cultural leaders the question must be how do we prise open that closed system. How do we open up pathways for diverse voices – how do I help a particular story jump over the choke points that could stand in the way of it getting through.

By choke points I mean where a key decision is made about the future of the journey to production. Points where a creative project can be killed off inadvertently by the decision of one or two people. Where decisions are made about whose lives are worth putting a frame around, where multiple barriers: parental pressure even access to transport can mean less opportunity for some. To keep the doors open to a plurality of voices we need to think of diversity as a central dimension of the entire domain of culture and society and look at interventions that begin at secondary school through to HE that then feed through to the industry.

In my first three years at NIDA I have worked mainly ground up with the students, working to give them confidence in their own cultural narratives and wisdoms and ensuring that they have the tools and self assurance to position their narratives centre stage on graduation. The work has been very successful and I share some of their reflections in closing. The ground up now needs top down traction so I am working with senior management to work on the bigger task of understanding how this work might act as a catalyst to impact and ripple through the whole organization so that diversity in action sits at the heart.

So on closing I share these reflections from two of my students who have just graduated :

*[...]when you came along and asked me to use my Fijian and Samoan culture, that was confronting and liberating at the same time. It was something that I could also use in a contemporary Australian industry. It doesn't mean that I have to save my Samoan/Fijian culture for just for Fijian or Samoan audiences or for Polynesian audiences, it can be used in front of an Australian audience.*

and

*Being able to bring a part of me into the rehearsal room and my culture once I allowed the fear of judgment to pass, was a breath of fresh air. Being able to share and tell my ancestors stories, my grandmothers, my mothers and my own experience into a safe environment in both the rehearsal room and on stage was a key part for me and my journey of helping unlock my true self and my capabilities as an actor and as a person, no longer pleasing people or putting on a voice to make people feel comfortable...*

*I was just being myself, the actor who happens to be Australian Aboriginal,  
African American and Native American Indian.*

Thankyou

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