

THE ANCHOR, THE CENTRE,
THE SHELTER, THE DWELLING:
A CONVERSATION ABOUT
CONTEMPORARY THEATRE
PRACTICE IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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(JA) AND JOE TOOHEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
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JT: My name is Joe Toohey. I'm the Executive Director and CEO at Regional Arts Victoria.¹ I'm recording from the lands of the Kulin Nation and I extend my respects to their Elders past and present.²

JA: My name is Jude Anderson and I'm the founder and Artistic Director of Punctum, a live arts organisation that's regionally based on Jaara Country.³ It's the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung in Central Victoria.⁴

JT: How did you come to find yourself running a live arts organisation in Castlemaine?

JA: I grew up regionally, and it's how I relate to place. All of that was informed by how I played. It was mainly outside and with others, but not with any great amount of entertainment around. We created our own entertainment; I carried [with me] that relationship with play and with place and with land and country, the work around it, the influence of seasons and weather. I grew up in Jaara Country and the only time that I was never bored as a child was when I was working on extra-curricular activities that were linked to devising stuff, whether that be solutions to problems or performances, and then later, advocacy and involvement in politics.

I spent a long time living and working overseas to understand what it was to create in different contexts, and what you connect with, and how all of that works. My partner, who is a wine-maker, was invited to come to Australia [he's not Australian] to develop a project around bio-dynamic viticulture and wine-making, and that seemed exciting. We came back here and I was looking around for where there were people doing exciting, contemporary, experimental works in regional contexts so that I could connect with them. At the time, there weren't many options, particularly regionally, and so I thought 'that's an area I'm just going to

have to do myself’, to entertain myself with that – getting back to the primal place of what keeps you connected. What does it mean to be human in the land or country within which you’re located at that particular time?

I spent six months looking into that. Castlemaine is close to where I grew up; it was very familiar country to me. All of the challenges were still there. They hadn’t changed and then, just little by little, I worked on projects that drew people to them. Punctum came out of three or four years of those projects.

JT: When was Punctum established?

JA: In 2004. Sweet sixteen in 2020: we’ve reached the point of a certain maturity. Perhaps we’ll start blossoming soon!

JT: You talked a bit about your own feelings of working on play and experimentation – I wonder if you could expand on that a little bit more?

JA: First and foremost, it’s located in the nub of something that you feel deeply about, and that is shared by others. I am no more sensitive to that than a farmer, but what I produce through that sensibility is always stepping into a place of shift or movement or recalibration or dis-equilibrium, and that enables me to open up dialogue with people who aren’t artists, but who potentially have a profound understanding

of that shift from a different standpoint. My role through the experiment is to see what happens if we take that shift and put it at the centre of research or a practice and then open that up for dialogue in the place in which we are located. It's being sensitive to the times and the people of the place, but it's also a questioning of the systems in which we operate as a society and looking at where those systems are cracking or where they are opening up, or where they are changing. It's an understanding of threshold points, and every experiment is a work in how the presence of people gathering together can inform a questioning of that shift and how you get beyond the intellectual and into a place of greater emotional connection.

That is the human side of things: what does it mean to be human in the land or country at this moment of time and what connects us to that? It's a deeply anchored questioning, and I think it's that integrity that I can bring to the conversations that I have with anyone who's located regionally and understand what that richness of dialogue contributes to how we might think through a process of creating together.

JT: So that anchor is the connection point across different regional areas, you've found in your work, because you're familiar with that anchoring that you get from working within *your* place within Castlemaine? Is that conversation easier to have than with people who are based in the city?

JA: I've lived in both a regional area and very big metropolitan contexts, and it's not as parochial as being anchored to the area in which I grew up, though that's where I find myself now. It's really an understanding of what the greater connections are for you when you're located in a regional context. For example, I lived and worked regionally in France for about eight years in a tiny hamlet. The construction of towns and how farming works there speaks to a deep history that has propelled agriculture in Europe, and my understanding of the European connection to climate changes, seasons, and how you work with the land came through that. I gained a whole understanding through a practice of *terroir*.⁵ So I'm really curious about how my own practice connects with things you're ultimately connected to in a metro context, too: it's just that you're not living it in the same way – like living a storm coming through. It's what you do in that context, with potentially the increasing ferocity and extremes of weather shifts. There's a lot to suggest that we are in a big climate crisis at the moment. How that affects the technology with which farmers are working is very different to how it affects the technology with which metro people are working. The shifts that are occurring in regional contexts around the world in a Western agricultural context are huge and swift, and farming is stepping out of being industrial into a supremely technological phase. At the same time, there is still a nostalgia

about what informs Australia as a nation, through the lens of celebrated eighteenth-century poets. Having come from a theatre background, it's the points of tension that exist regionally that I connect with more immediately than in a metro context, where I can more easily hide from the weather.

JT: That sense of where you live becoming a really strong part of your identity and therefore informing your creative practice is common to a lot of creative practitioners that I work with. But there are other markers of identity that impact the way that we think and live, and thereby impact our practice as an artist. Some of the work that you've done more recently with Punctum has explored the cultural lens of identity, and it might be good to talk about those and how that intersects with living regionally.

JA: How we recognise diversity in regional contexts and what voices are spoken about through that? There's a very strong history of migration in the area where I live and work, because of the Gold Rush. So there's a very strong expression of multiculturalism in the names of streets, in some of the local agriculture, and in some cultural institutions. But it's not spoken about in contemporary contexts: in the works that get programmed and in how things get spoken about, there's a cognitive disjunction.

In 2007, I was given the opportunity to do a work at a place that I knew had been a Chinese vegetable garden, where I had gone as a kid to get food. In the 1970s, they were still keeping great food-growing in this historical goldfields context. The first project that I took on in that context was combining the notion of Chinese composting houses with ‘night soil’ with the very Australian notion of the outside dunny.⁶ We created the work in this vegetable garden area like a little cinema, where there was an animation around composting. We used materials from the site where there had been a Chinese brickworks and constructed this amazing little outhouse that is just so beautifully proportioned because I worked with a sculptor.

That was the start of that, and it gave rise to an interweaving of questions and themes. In 2010, I did a big residency called *In-Habit* which featured nine works and looked at what happens when you put cultural exchange at the core of your contemporary practice. Then I did a work for the European Cultural Capital in 2015 in Belgium, where there were twenty-four artists and we created the ‘Migratory Complex’. We gave away free passports and all the artists there were people of mixed cultural backgrounds and their work was an expression of that. More recently, focusing on our local area, we worked with Hazara, South Sudanese and Karen artists and artisans to develop a new form of a Cultural Centre – one that expressed

how they wanted to be together. It was finding an equilibrium or a democracy, and at the same time we undertook workshops and did work in the cultural institutions in Bendigo, who were fantastic – Ulumburra Theatre, Bendigo Art Gallery, the La Trobe Arts Institute and the Library.

There was a breadth of art forms and places where culture and art were celebrated. How I – as a privileged white woman who’s grown up in the area – could be a bridge with Punctum, a way of opening doors and celebrating their [the Hazara, South Sudanese and Karen artists’ and artisans’] perspective.

JT: Sometimes innovation lies in how a work is presented. Sometimes it’s born of necessity, and a number of organisations across regional Victoria are working and creating exchanges that are not dependent on institutions – particularly where those institutions aren’t there in the first place. As one of your responses to that, you actually just literally created a space through the Cooling House, that could be adapted for different contexts and different ways of presenting work.⁷

JA: The Cooling House was a very specific mechanism that acted as a machine for evaporative cooling in a context of a future where water is going to be an increasingly limited resource. This questioned how you gather people around this very precious resource without being dogmatic or

pedantic, and what the sensuality is in that. We created this fictional gathering place where there was a cooling ritual, which was a splashing together of different cultural rituals. Then we spoke with people about their different practices of keeping cool in different cultures. There was a huge amount of interest from passers-by and onlookers who were from culturally diverse backgrounds. It happened at a time when there was a lot of controversy in central Victoria about the building of the mosque, which got pretty nasty. It was fuelled by extremists with vested interests from elsewhere in Australia, and rather than stepping into the frontline of protest, I thought this building and the fact that someone from India who's living here wanted to buy one – just like straight up to have in their backyard – I thought this was a really interesting thing.

We introduced the Cooling House as a template for how people from the Karen, South Sudanese and Hazara communities could take that template, that footprint and rethink it. Redesign it. These artists and artisans took that and they totally transformed it and reprogrammed it. But the footprint is the same. A Cultural Centre can be anything. It could just be a circle inscribed in the ground. It's how you're centering people's attention and gathering around the celebration of culture. That's all it is. So having grappled with that while

working in theatres and then outside on large-scale works in sheep paddocks and factories, even up a tree ...

JT: Even on flatbed trucks.

JA: Yes, trucks or utes, or just standing in a place, and that standing there means that people gather and something is shared. A story is told, a connection is made, a temporary community is found. That's a Cultural Centre. That's very freeing.

JT: We often don't actually acknowledge that where you are and who you are – that's your centre. That's the position that you're in, and actually the stuff that we talk about at a macro level, about an 'Australian culture', is a confusion of commonality with centrality. In fact, where you live is your particular centre of something. I think a lot of programmes and responses tend to be about engineering shifts from the edges to the middle and not about the middle coming out to the edges.

The way that you're approaching your work with Punctum and with the Cooling House as a portable centre, both literally in that it's a centre that you can actually be in and perform in but also the way it is adapted and used, which can be led by the people who are controlling that particular project and programme.

JA: That's the 'Kultur-All Makaan' that uses the architectural template of the Cooling House as a framework through

which to consider culture for all. Kultur-All Makaan means ‘dwelling’ in quite a few languages. In a couple of Southeast Asian languages, it also means ‘food’ or ‘nourishment’. The Kultur-All Makaan came about as a framework through which to consider culture for all as the most nourishing thing outside of food, really. This place as a dwelling held that and sheltered that; it’s wherever it goes.

We put it up for the weekend that a COVID lockdown phase was declared in Victoria. It operated for two days and then we had to shut it down, so we don’t know what it is in its fullest iteration. But wherever it goes, it can connect those people at the origin of the project with those who continue to contribute. It’s a desire of the artists and artisans who contributed at its origin that it keeps ‘filling’ either through the programme or contributions. It’s a little bit of real estate that unpacks, pops up and things happen, and its very presence suggests that something magic is about to happen. If you step inside, you’ll be part of that magic, and welcomed with that warmth that that these artists and artisans have created. Someone who’s familiar with our work said: ‘Well, the Cooling House is an air flow and the Kultur-All Makaan is a cultural flow’.

JT: I love the idea of bringing more people into the metaphorical and literal tent with each use. My wife is Jewish, and we got married under a *Chuppah*, which is four poles and

then a covering that goes over the top. There's a range of different meanings and symbolism behind it all, and one is that it represents a household with four open-entry points that everyone is invited into. The covering itself was made by a relative, and that is wrapped up and sent on to somebody else when they get married, and each person adds their own little bit, such as initials and dates. I've got no idea where that covering is right now, but I love the idea that it's out in the world and that I was part of it. I got to be part of one of the runs of that particular Chuppah. This physical thing can take some of what happened within it, wherever it goes.

JA: That structure in particular, Joe – like many of the works that are part of the Kultur-All Makaan, they are an expression of cultures that have had to keep moving over the centuries, for various reasons like the food supply running out, or persecution, civil war, or opportunity – like the Gold Rush here.

The Muji Scrolls are like that for the Chinese population here. They give the story of the cycles of nature from the country they came from, and they can be rolled up. I used the Muji Scroll as an expression of mobility in *Big Walk to Golden Mountain*, which we did across the goldfields in 2017, in commemoration of 160 years since the walk from Robe in South Australia to the central goldfields. We worked across the goldfields from Ballarat to Castlemaine, but the Muji

Scroll was the leitmotif because that was the thing that you could carry with you.

With the Kultur-All Makaan, we worked with those artists and those artisans mentioned and they took that traditional practice linked to mobility and migration and looked at how these three very separate cultures could then create a work that was cohesive: informed by all of those traditions, but to some extent exploded by the multicultural or intercultural nature of the work. It got down to colours and textures; it was quite a design project. I think the sensuality of ideas is fundamental to working. It gets you out of the intellectual and into textures and colours and sound and flavours. That is the thing that I search for: to have things coherent at a dramaturgical level, like these objects of mobility and how they're expressed, and how that comes into the dialogue. My role in terms of the Kultur-All Makaan was just to keep asking questions so that people felt they were understanding each other's cultures as well as understanding greater things about their own cultures, and then sharing that.

NOTES

- 1 See rav.net.au.
- 2 See aboriginalhistoryof-yarra.com.au/1-introduction.
- 3 See punctum.com.au/punctum.
- 4 See djadjawurrung.com.au.
- 5 A French term that refers to the complete natural environment in which a particular wine is produced, including factors such as the soil, topography and climate (lexico.com/definition/terroir).
- 6 ‘Night soil’ refers to human waste collected, often at night, which was sometimes then used as a fertiliser (permaculture-news.org/2017/06/14/making-modern-day-night-soil/).
- 7 See punctum.com.au/works/punctums-public-cooling-house.