

**A GYM FOR EMPATHY: A
CONVERSATION ABOUT REGIONAL
MIGRANT STORIES, THEATRE AND
THE BANQUET OF LIFE**

**ELENA CARAPETIS, WRITER, ACTOR AND DIRECTOR
(EC), AND ANTHONY PELUSO, EXECUTIVE DIREC-
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AP: My name is Anthony Peluso. I'm the Chief Executive and Executive Director at Country Arts SA [South Australia].¹ Country Arts SA has been running for the last twenty-seven years as a statutory authority of the Government of South Australia and we present, share and create work with and by regional South Australians. I join this conversation this morning on Kaurna Country and pay my respects to Elders past and present, and recognise their continuing connection to the land and waters of this place, which I'm very privileged to live on.

EC: *Bongiorno. Kali mera.* Good morning. My name is Elena Carapetis. I am a writer, actor and director. I am the child of Greek and Cypriot migrants and I am coming to you also from beautiful Kurna Country. And I'd also like to acknowledge the fact that I'm living on unceded Aboriginal land, and that I recognise the enormous privilege that I have living here and having the opportunity to tell stories and sing and dance on land with the oldest continuing culture in the world. I pay my respects to First Nations Peoples of Australia past, and to present and emerging Elders, too. I am the former resident artist at State Theatre Company of South Australia.

AP: I thought I might couch the conversation in terms of the changing focus that Country Arts has had over the last five to eight years. We've traditionally been a presenter of other people's work, of other points of view of the world, and it's been great to bring in a diverse range of art forms and stories that connect with regional South Australian audiences. From that we spin off a whole range of arts experiences and workshop opportunities to get deeper behind the work. Increasingly, though, it's become important for Country Arts SA to support the making of work that's about regional South Australia.

That was the kernel of a conversation that I had a few years back now with the then Executive Director and Artistic Director of State Theatre Company of South Australia, Rob and Geordie

Brookman, around a long-term plan for our two organisations to work deeply together in regional South Australia with artists and with communities right across the state. The gem in that entire plan was the creation of new work. Geordie said that he had this great idea and had spoken to a woman called Elena Carapetis who had a deep connection with regional South Australia. I could tell from the way Geordie was speaking that he had hit upon exactly the right thing to kick-start this new process for the two organisations.

And here we are now, Elena, a few years past the 2018 premiere and presentation of a great work, and I'm keen for you to lead us through the creation of *The Gods of Strangers*, to share the processes and the thinking and engagement that occurred. So maybe if we could start at the point when you were actually invited into the conversation. I'm keen to know what your response was to the opportunity of creating a new work that had strong links with regional South Australia.

EC: I was in the office at the Lion Arts Centre in Adelaide and Geordie sidled up to me and said, 'You're from the country, aren't you?' I was born in Whyalla and grew up in Port Pirie. My family and my parents migrated to Nukunu Country in Port Pirie. That's where they landed in Australia.

Geordie said, 'We're doing this regional engagement strategy

with Country Arts SA and do you reckon you could write a play about regional South Australia?’ I said, ‘Yes’; my mouth engaged with my heart and my creativity, before my logical brain did. I said to him, ‘It will probably have to be set in Port Pirie. I’m pretty sure that it’ll be about my family and it will probably be in three languages.’

That was the first impulsive response that I had to his provocation. What I’m really thrilled about is that both State Theatre Company and Country Arts allowed me to totally lead through that – to lead us all through that impulse to the fruition of the show. It was a perfect coming together of organisations and producers and artists and a writer that all came on board and totally committed and trusted my impulses as an artist. That made all the difference.

AP: It’s interesting that you say that your heart engaged before your logical brain did. What did your logical brain say, once it had a chance to speak?

EC: ‘Oh gosh. Now I’m going to have to write it.’ Which is terrifying, because my first language as an artist is as an actor, and actors are interpreters. We already have basic pieces of information that we then interpret and create, but with the writer you start with a blank page and my head was swimming in the possibilities of what this play could be. So then I set

off doing lots of research, talking to my family. They were so thrilled. When I asked my family to talk about their history, we would be there for a long time. The play is a little bit of a love letter to my family and my ancestors. I'm sure that you, Anthony, as a migrant kid, know that much of our psychology as migrant children is showing our appreciation to our family and our ancestors and our parents for all of the sacrifices that they made for us. For me, this play was an opportunity to do that. I got in touch with the Italian community at Pirie as well, because I felt that was a beautiful way to tie in another cultural and language group. That was a big part of Port Pirie culture and my life growing up.

AP: I'm really curious about those stories, which from our Elders are so rich, as stories from Elders normally are, and what you uncovered in that face-to-face investigation.

EC: I also went back to Greece and Italy as part of this whole adventure, but especially to Pirie and speaking to people there. Pirie people are gorgeous. They are so friendly; they are so open-hearted. I spent a really good amount of time there, particularly at the maritime museum that was built by the Molfettese community [from Molfetta, in Italy] in Pirie. If you come in as an artist and you're really transparent about what you're doing and what you're asking about and why, they're really generous in response. It also helped that I

was a person from a migrant background. Even though I'm not Italian, I grew up around Italian people and, as much as Greeks and Italians have their history, it helped being from a non-English speaking background rather than from the dominant white Anglo culture. It wasn't like I was peering through a microscope. I was standing there with my history behind me that was quite similar to their history. The main feedback when I asked people about their family stories was that they were so grateful someone wanted to listen and document it and put it on stage.

There was also this sense – from deep humility, not from shame – of whether people would be interested in hearing about their story, apart from people from our own community. My response was that I love the theatre and I've grown up going to the theatre and watching *Hamlet* and Willy Loman and all the characters of David Williamson – people that I really don't have anything in common with, but theatre is a gym for empathy. If I can sit through watching *Hamlet* and *Death of a Salesman* and feel a connection because the writing is beautiful and the human experience is universal, then someone who isn't Greek or Italian, or a migrant, or bilingual, should be able to watch this play and get something out of it. What I came to learn was that the more specific you make the story, the more universal it becomes.

AP: What was your approach to those stories of real people, some of whom are still with us today?

EC: I wanted to honour the women as well as the men in my family. An intuitive response was that the leads were going to be women over the age of sixty, with English as their second language. I interviewed the people in my life and the Italian community. I did lots of research around World War II, where Italian people were rounded up and put into internment camps if there were even suspicions that they had fascist connections. I thought that was an incredible part of Australian history that I didn't really know much about, which I wanted to unpack.

I got strands of stories. For example, my mum had an aunt in Port Pirie whose son had died of a mystery illness. She couldn't have any more children. She went back to Cyprus and agreed with her sister to adopt my mother. My mother was brought over to Australia as a child to live with her aunt. My grandma, my father's mother, my *Yiayia*, was put on a ship to marry a man whom she hadn't met. When she got here, she refused to marry him because he wasn't who he claimed to be.

Everything that happens in the play was a story told to me. These stories were a piece of fabric; I un-wove the original fabric, then I wove the stories back together. It's the truth,

but it's just a couple of degrees off what really happened: a re-woven tapestry of all of the stories that were given to me. My mum sitting in the audience can see the references to her life, but they're not so personal that she feels taken advantage of, or exposed, or disrespected as someone who shared that story with me. I feel I made that balance really well.

AP: The audience really can respond to those truths that form the narrative of the play from their own perspective, even if it's not their exact story. My parents got to see the play. I was quite surprised by their response; they said that it was a great play, but it didn't really reflect their 'coming to Australia' story at all. I was shocked by that, because I had the simple notion that one migrant story is all migrant stories and everyone shares the same elements. My parents then shared with me their own stories of coming to Australia, which was a great learning on my behalf.

I recall fondly being in the Northern Festival Centre in Port Pirie on the first night and hearing the different reactions from the audience to different parts of the play. The fact that it was in three languages meant that there were some elements that were more easily understood by Italians or by Greeks. They would laugh at things well before the rest of us, who were trying to read the subtitles to understand the exact meaning of words. I learnt that night that in fact there was a fourth

audience in that room, in addition to the Italians and the Greeks and those who go to the theatre regularly: there was also a Port Pirie audience, reacting to a number of references throughout the play. That reaction in the room was almost the loudest of all. It was an amazing experience to be in that theatre to hear and watch a play about the place that we're in and to see the reaction from the people who live there, who have lived through similar stories or have deep connections to the story on the stage.

How did you feel about being in Port Pirie on the two nights of the performances?

EC: There's always first-night nerves. This was a really personal show and there was so much for me at stake, not only creatively. That play represents what I stand for as a person and an artist as well, so the stakes were really high. To present the work in front of the people that it was made for was also pretty nerve-racking, but it was the most visceral reaction that I've ever felt in an audience. It was this organic, free-range audience; there wasn't quiet mumbling politeness. They were totally unfiltered. The theatre itself was buzzing because it's quite a small community and everybody knew everybody.

A bunch of my family came from around the country to see it in Port Pirie. The show starts with the actors talking

about men lining up to get work at the smelter. You could feel the audience going: ‘Oh my God. I know this. I know this life. I know this story.’ As the work unfolded, the delight I felt from the audience seeing themselves represented and reflected back was incredible. There was a department store in Pirie for many years called Prests, that had sadly closed the week that we were there. There’s a scene where a young woman asks where she can get a pair of stockings and she’s told to go to Prests on Ellen Street, and the whole place went up. It was like being at a football match. At the end of that night, a woman came up to me, overjoyed and teary. She asked me, ‘When you take this to Adelaide, you’re going to change all of the names, aren’t you?’ I said, ‘No. I wrote the play, and the play is set in Pirie.’ She couldn’t believe it. She was so moved by the fact that in the Australian playwriting canon there’s going to be a play set in her hometown, about her people. That conversation will stay with me for a long time.

AP: When I go back to Port Pirie now as part of my work, people are still referencing *The Gods of Strangers*. They’re talking about that play that was created from stories and with people who had deep connections with Port Pirie, with a sense of pride. There are repercussions and ripples from the creation of that work that will go on for quite a long time.

The other really important element was that the final production week should take place in Port Pirie. It would have been much easier for us to have had all the rehearsals – tech rehearsals, etc. – in Adelaide and then just take the work, as we so very often do, to Port Pirie to present it. Having the cast, the creatives, wardrobe, etc. in Port Pirie for an entire week meant that we could open up the back end of the play and really have deep conversations about how theatre is made. That was a great opportunity to share skills and excite the people of Pirie.

EC: Just being in Pirie was a terrific vibe. We did meet lots of really dedicated and passionate drama teachers and people from the local community theatre groups. There was an opportunity for them to watch the show being teched and to walk through some of the creative choices that we made. The other thing that's really important is how significant it is that someone sees themselves represented, because I never saw myself represented as a school kid in the theatre. That's a whole other conversation around finding your voice and where you belong. Having a young person sit in the theatre and see someone speak a language that they hear at home – the significance of that is not to be underestimated.

A dear friend and colleague of mine, Rashidi Edward, who is from the Democratic Republic of Congo, saw a couple

of shows that same year including *Prize Fighter*,² which is a beautiful play written by another Congolese person, and he saw my play and he is now really committed to writing his origin story of being an Australian. You can't be what you can't see, and you don't have to see someone who is exactly like you; even if they're a little bit like you, then that can send you on your way. The more that we can empathise and have compassion for each other, the better – with some really good drama and conflict thrown in!

AP: I can't remember how many times I saw your play, and every time I cried. I'm not prone to crying, but I did cry almost every time and it's taken me a long time to realise why; it's because I'm hearing the Italian language on the stage as a valid language. The actors were speaking Italian, and hearing that language and hearing the interplay between the Italian and the Greek and the English is special. That's the culture that I grew up in. The fact that you are hearing these languages in a very natural way, in culturally appropriate ways, right down to the point of swearing in Italian, takes me back to your comment about the visceral nature of the auditorium in Port Pirie, and how great it was to be in a room where people had forgotten that they were in an audience watching a play. I just kept thinking that if only every theatre audience was like this one!

EC: In Pirie, there was an older Italian gentleman who recognised one of the characters named after a real person, [and] was screaming out from the auditorium and telling everybody who he was. He was calling out this amazing spoiler. In Adelaide one night, we had three generations of an Italian Molfettese family – the grandchild, the mum and the Nonna. A couple of older Greek or Italian ladies came and just sat wherever they wanted in the auditorium. The front-of-house explained that the seats are ticketed and these ladies are like, ‘No, we’re going to sit here’. The people whose seats they had didn’t mind sitting somewhere else. The rules were broken, and a new life and energy was injected into the auditorium.

The audience in Adelaide was also made up of people who didn’t come from Pirie, but rather from Mildura or Renmark, or went to Far North Queensland to cut cane, and [their] story was similar. We had people from different migrant backgrounds: Croatian, Indian and Chinese. There is a common thread through people’s stories and they’ll take them where they can. I would be grabbed at interval; often I wouldn’t have time to run to the loo because people were so desperate to share their feedback with me: ‘My story is this and I’m from Ceduna or Coober Pedy’. It’s so the kind of ‘bang for your buck’ that you get from staging a regional story that ripples out from that specific town.

AP: One night that will remain with me forever is the final performance in Port Pirie, where the ladies of the Italian community prepared a supper for us afterwards. There were Italian delicacies there that I hadn't experienced in quite some time. There was a great sense of joy and celebration, of being part of a larger community. This is something that I have experienced often working in regional South Australia. The celebration at the end of that week and those two great nights of theatre was a concentrated form of our cultures coming together around food and around stories.

EC: It wasn't sexy catering with arancini balls being passed around on a plate. This was something personal and handmade. You could taste the attention and love and generosity in the huge table. This was their way of giving back to us. It was one of the warmest opening night parties that I've ever been to. Usually they're really nerve-wracking but this didn't really feel like an opening night. It felt like a wedding. I also remember fondly the night at the Hellenic Club because my godmother, who has since passed, my Nonna Teeny, she was in the rear of the audience and was really moved by it. She said that she didn't think anyone gave a shit enough about people like her to go to the trouble of making a play about it. This broke my heart. My family and people like my family, they are humble, hardworking people. They're not kings and they're

not queens and princesses: they're farmers and fishermen and their stories are just as valid and interesting and important.

AP: Some of the other local stories that didn't make it into the play were presented in the foyers of the theatre with photographs and history: people's connections and coming to Pirie and their families, with great photographs of them sharing food and celebrating. In a way, that's what your play is about: what is great about life. The truth of living with people who are doing the best they can with what they have. Who are in uncharted waters, but really generous in their approach and wanting to make sure that they leave this world in a better place than when they entered it. For me, that's the story of my family trying to make life better.

EC: That night really embodied the spirit of the play of these hardworking people – people who got in a boat to come to the other side of the world to make a better life for their descendants, who embrace life with all of its joy and all of its sorrow and all of its pain and all of its humour: every single facet, the banquet of life.

NOTES

- 1 See <https://www.countryarts.org.au/>.
- 2 See <https://www.artour.com.au/artists/prize-fighter>.