

**A COMMUNITY OF PRODUCERS:
A CONVERSATION ABOUT
VOCABULARY, WEATHER,
CREATIVE PROBLEM-CRACKING,
DISTANCE AND PERFORMANCE IN
REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**CHLOE FLOCKHART, MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST (CF)
AND PAUL MCPHAIL, CEO, REGIONAL ARTS WA (PMP)**

PMP: My name is Paul McPhail. I'm the CEO of Regional Arts WA [Western Australia] and I'm sitting here on Whadjuk Land of the Nyoongar people and would like to pay my respects to Elders past and present.

CF: My name is Chloe Flockhart, and I'm a regional artist from the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia. I'm an interdisciplinary artist, which is just a fancy word for saying I do a lot of different things.

PMP: Do you think that having to do a lot of different things is just the lot of the regional artist?

CF: Yes. Arts jobs are few and far between when you're out in the regions. You have to skill yourself up to apply for anything, and you'll find yourself working a lot in community-based practices. Sometimes you're going out and finding skills to bring them back to your community; you might be learning wood carving one week and painting another, because that's what the community group wants to do. I'm a bit of a Swiss Army knife.

PMP: You're from the Central Wheatbelt. There are people who have no idea what that means and where it might be, and how far away from anywhere that is.

CF: The biggest town near me is Merredin, halfway between Perth and Kalgoorlie. Merredin is predominantly a sheep and wheat town. We have a very large CBH bin¹ and Merredin is a node town; a lot of smaller towns feed into it. It's very hot in summer and can get very cold in winter. That also affects arts out in Merredin and the Central Wheatbelt.

PMP: But you're not actually there at the moment, are you?

CF: No. I'm currently in Kalgoorlie, working with a school. A lot of my arts practice is community engagement. Sometimes

that means working with schools; sometimes with community groups; sometimes with other artists. When I'm based regionally, I travel regionally more often. When I'm based in the city, I'm generally finding works around the city.

PMP: What balance do you have in your work in terms of working regionally or working in a metropolitan setting?

CF: I try to do 50/50 – six months a year regionally based and six months a year urban based. Last year, it was regional Western Australia and regional United Kingdom. I've been transitioning my arts practice over to the UK for about four years. When I'm working in the city for too long, I lose a bit of my creative flow and get very bogged down in admin. When I come back into the regions, time just moves a little bit slower. There's a lot more space. I'm able to be a lot more creatively expressive.

PMP: Is the work that you make or create different when you're living regionally than it might be when you're working urban?

CF: When I'm in the city, I'm predominantly building and working under other artists. I might be doing sets or props or puppet-making; small jobs here and there. They're very frenetic and that can be very exciting. When I'm out in the country, I find I have more time to focus on my own practice. I get to do things like research and development. Last year, I was renovating my

house and also writing a show, which I then went over to the UK to produce.

PMP: It sounds to me as though there are generally more employment opportunities in a metropolitan setting, while in a regional setting, you hone your craft and focus on your creations?

CF: I go to regional WA when I have to do deep thinking, because there isn't as much distraction, I'm within my own community of people, and everybody knows each other. It's a lot gentler out there. But when you're in the city, your timeline is very condensed and packed full. I try to find a balance between the two: inspiration and distraction.

PMP: There's also of disparity in terms of resources. Do you find yourself having to take a leadership role in finding those sorts of things when you get home?

CF: Regional WA is under-resourced in terms of professional venues. On the coast, we've got a lot of amazing entertainment centres. Geraldton, Bunbury and even here in Kalgoorlie – all have beautiful entertainment centres and they're incredibly well resourced. As a theatre artist, I find the opportunity to interface with venues like that is amazing. But out where I am, we don't have that; we have Cummins Theatre, which is its own very amazing and well-resourced, beautiful theatre. Beautiful pressed tin roof; definitely haunted by a ghost called

Alice. It's wonderful, but it's not a place that I can necessarily make the art that I make.

I do a very particular style of puppetry. It requires an audience to be very close. I trained in black box theatres. Regional venues are generally the old-school stage and dance hall set-up. They're not necessarily the right fit for the kind of work that I do. If I'm going out to regional WA, if I'm making a show, it's going to be made specifically for that venue, but I'm going to have to think about adjustments for it to go into other centres. Resource-wise, even simple things like accessing fabrics and paints, it's a day trip into Perth collecting everything from Bunnings and driving it back out.

PMP: Do you have peers in Merredin?

CF: I'm trying to build a peer network. There are people in Merredin who are very interested in the performing arts. There's a lot of young people in Merredin, and Justin who manages Cummins Theatre has been a wonderful injection of passion into the community. I'm working with a Repertory Club in Merredin at the moment. If I'm going and working out regionally, I'm going to be training people to be my peers, which is something that I have to factor into projects. That in itself can also offer really exciting opportunities, because when you're training people, you have to be really reflective on

your practice and really precise with your language. Because I work regionally and do so much training, when [I go to] the UK, compared to other artists in the UK, I'm incredibly competitive because I'm really precise about my practice. I'm really good at teaching it. It's been easy for me to find jobs over there and I wouldn't have found that transition so easy had I not spent so long bumping around WA building up peers and training people.

PMP: Have you had the opportunity to create something and present it back to your own community?

CF: No, it's something I'm working on. Back in 2014, we did *Farm* through Spare Parts Puppet Theatre. They predominantly produced it in Fremantle, then it toured to Kalgoorlie. It then got remounted at Spare Parts. I wasn't involved in that particular production of it.

It's very tricky to produce work in Merredin to present back to Merredin, because there aren't members within the community who are theatre producers. So as an artist, I find myself wearing many hats and I'll become my own show producer. I might be writing it. I might be directing it but also be training people up for it. I'll be training people how to build for it. It becomes a lot to wear. If I go the other way, which is to engage with my Perth peers and bring them out,

that's very expensive because I have to find them accommodation. There's the cost of travel and the time of travel, and performing artists don't necessarily want to leave Perth because it's so frenetic and engaging and they have so much stuff there. I understand how to produce work in Perth first and bring it out to Merredin. I'm trying to figure out if there's a way of reversing that pipeline and producing work regionally and sending it back into the city and then bouncing it out to other regional centres.

PMP: That's something that I want to see happen much more. Is the restriction because of space and resources? If we had an inflatable space would that fix it?

CF: It would definitely make a show happen. But it's not a long-term solution. It's actually a vocabulary thing. When I'm bringing up terms within my community to do with improvisation practice, or when I'm referring to Keith Johnson and his improvisation practice, or puppetry techniques or directing techniques, there isn't the shared vocabulary that exists within my theatre community. There's a lot of halting, and there's also a bit of a fear. So many people that were so excited – 'You're back! I'd love to work with you on this!' – when you push the conversation a bit further, there is a real fear: 'I don't think I'll be good enough; it's something I wanted to do as a kid, but I just never really pursued it; I don't really have time'.

I want to really dig into my own community. This is going to take a long time, and it's not going to make a show happen this year. But I want to show them that they have all the skills, they just don't have the language. But who within this community has a story that they would like the greater world to see? Why do you want the greater world to see that story? What kind of things do you feel? Perhaps from that we will see a show produced, but also perhaps from that we will see the community starting to stand up and produce their own work. We're all now talking about the same thing. I want to turn my whole community into producers, because I don't want to leave Merredin and for all of that language to go with me. I want to infuse language into my community so that they can develop their own practice.

PMP: There are people who are doing that sort of community work and have obviously spent many years working with their communities, and now get to that point where they have that shared language and that shared experience and can produce work. Do you get to see any of those people as mentors?

CF: I'm on the periphery regionally. Funded work means work made on the coast. I don't live on the coast. So for me to get to see Annette Carmichael's work, it's quicker for me to travel to Ravensthorpe where she might be doing a workshop, which is four-and-a-half hours, than it is for me to travel to Bunbury

or into Perth.² WA is built on the coast and we're these tiny little satellite communities of people inland, and it's insane to spend huge money on a tiny pocket of people when you can spend money on a slightly bigger pocket and get a slightly bigger output.

A few members of the community, including me and my darling mother Julie Flockhart – who is an incredible community go-getter – have looked into creating an incorporated arts body for Merredin. The reason is that we're then going to be able to engage with organisations like Circuit West, which gives me access to people like Annette Carmichael or Ainsley Foulds in Ravensthorpe.³ We will be able to actually communicate with each other and via Facebook see the process, discuss the process with each other, discuss the pros and cons and what worked within the community and what didn't. Ainslie and I met through a Zoom meeting about resilience funding, and Julie and I drove down to Ravensthorpe to have a cup of coffee with her and discuss incorporated arts bodies.

PMP: I think that's a body of work that we are trying to grapple with in a much better way, in terms of making sure that someone like you can feel connected much more easily than has been possible in the past, because there are networks out there, but it's not always easy to get the inroad into the network to start with.

CF: COVID has been an odd positive because everybody's become digitally native and suddenly everybody's all in these Zoom meetings with each other. That physical distance is erased a little bit or becomes more elastic, and so, as much as COVID has absolutely decimated my arts practice and the industry, it's really started to shift collaboration into a very interesting space. I'm collaborating with an artist down in Bunbury at the moment, writing a show about The Great Emu War which happened in Campion, down the road from Merredin, just to actually look at the process of digital collaboration – not necessarily to produce a show, just an experiment.⁴ I'm feeling really hopeful that in the next couple of years we're all going to crack that one open a bit more and realise that we're a lot closer than we think, which is exciting because WA is so big.

PMP: For anyone who's not from WA, I think it can be really hard to just grasp the scale of how big it is.

CF: With my friends in the UK, I say: 'I did the equivalent of a drive from London to Edinburgh today and that got me from the city to the town I'm working in'. They say: 'Oh, so you're almost out of the state?' and I respond: 'No, the state ends in a few more Londons' time. And then if you go up, it's another seven Londons.'

PMP: How did you come to be an artist?

CF: I wasn't very smart at school and I wasn't very good at sport, and a few of my teachers didn't quite know what to do with me, because I was a very good verbal communicator. You could ask me a question and I could answer it and I'd be fine, [but] put a piece of paper in front of me, it's not going to come out particularly well. Throw a ball at my face and I'm not going to catch it. In a country school, that's a death sentence: you can't play sport? What are we going to do with you?

All through high school I could only see careers that were modelled around me, like teaching, nursing, agribusiness. Then I did a one-day workshop with a local artist from Merredin, Phillip Duncan, who was coming out to schools and doing life painting and dance. Then he came back and we did a two-day workshop, and they came back and we did a five-day workshop and I was like, 'oh, this is your job'. I kept asking everyone who was doing it, because he was bringing in members from all sorts of different communities: why do you do this? I love doing this but, as an adult, do you love doing this?

I was trying to articulate that, to the university pathways coordinator who came to visit our school. I said, 'This guy came to our school and he dances and paints. I want to do that.' She's said, 'You're doing English Literature, you're doing Human Biology, you're doing Discrete Mathematics, you're doing History. None of that leads to that.' I responded,

‘I can’t do Art and I can’t do Drama at Tertiary Entrance Exam level here. So how do I do that?’ She replied, ‘You can’t; you have to become a teacher’.

I didn’t go to uni because I didn’t want to do that, and got a job in a bank because it made money. Because I had some money, I started an after-school drama club and through that I did a little bit of teaching, which meant that I had to go and learn some things to be able to teach them. I was driving to Perth and back every Tuesday and Thursday night after work to do workshops. The students there, one of them went off to Curtin University and one of them tried out for WAAPA [the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts].

Through doing that, I realised I could actually be doing this: why am I so dedicated to sending other people away to do it? I saved up and sent myself to film school, and then after film school did the internship at Spare Parts Puppet Theatre, which was amazing because it really gave me an understanding of industry practice. As good as it was to learn puppetry, the thing I got from that was industry practice. They are a tight ship and I got to go out and do a tour for them. I got to see it from a tour managing perspective. And I [realised] that this arts thing is so much bigger than dancing and painting; it’s creative problem-solving. As much as I’m a puppet-maker

and prop-builder, all of it is just creative problem-cracking and I find it really fascinating and wonderful.

PMP: Is there a clearer path now?

CF: WAAPA has put their practice transition Bachelor course online. I started doing that this semester, which is amazing, because it's giving me the opportunity to really look at the psychology behind the training that I do. If I can understand the psychology behind puppetry and arts training, I can feed that into a community and feed that into work in a much more enriching way. I know where I'm headed now.

My pathway is never going to be linear. It isn't that I want to be the artistic director of a company. It's more like I see big problems, like 'my community doesn't have an arts and culture plan; why is that?' I'll dig that hole and open that up and try to fix it. Or 'this school wants to get their kids to learn Maths; they hate it, but they're good at movement. What can we use from dance to do that?' Dig that hole.

PMP: Something that I push and advocate for a lot is arts and cultural plans for local government authorities. Are you trying to crack that one open with your LGA? How is that going?

CF: The Shire of Merredin and I had a chat at the start of COVID. I was doing a grant application for Regional Arts

WA, and I wanted to make sure that what I was planning on doing would fit within their plan. If you're working in a small community, you don't want to get a big project when all of the community's resources are already focused on an event. We had a really open and robust conversation about what challenges they faced; what their plans were; how they were in a state of flux at that particular time. From there, I came up with a residency programme because I felt like that was the clearest way to solve the problem. You need the community to see some wins.

Unfortunately, there wasn't enough of an existing policy within my local government authority to be able to facilitate that. I was thinking of a project that they've never come across before, and for them, it was very big and they don't know how to facilitate that. This is why we've started going down the incorporated arts body route. Our LGA at this moment [particularly during COVID] is already under a lot of pressure. For them, as important as an arts and culture policy is, it's not as important as some other things facing the community right now. We stay in conversation, but now think about working parallel to them as opposed to working under them. That's an important thing about working within a community. Sometimes the structures in place don't have capacity. It's important to look at ways of reducing friction

between you and them. Get the information you need and come to them with a clear and solid plan and outcome, like some really, really clear and solid goals that you want to hit. If they do have an arts and culture plan, you're probably going to line up. If not, it makes it easy at a council meeting to say, 'There's a person in the community who wants to do this, the outcome will be this, it's going to be good for mental health, it's going to be good for the economy. Who here would like us to support it?'

PMP: Your particular community of Merredin, has it suffered a lot because of COVID?

CF: What's going to be more interesting is the barley tariff with China. Merredin is really isolated. It is a more aged population. There are a lot of independent people within that community. I did have the privilege of watching Julie, who's Shire President, have to learn about planning for these weird community apocalypses. That gave me an appreciation of just how hard COVID-19 was from a local government point of view, because the level of risk was either very big or very unknown.

Merredin is a community that is so affected by the weather. You will have businesses in town either open or closed because there was a flood that year; a drought that year; a locust plague that year; a bushfire that year. It's something to be very aware

of. When we were making *Farm*, it was a drought year. So that particular show was really well received by the community, because they just needed a little beacon of hope. But planning a community event around harvest time: don't do it, because no one will come. Now that I'm back in the community, I'm really aware that even though it feels like there's infinite time, there's not, because there's seeding, and harvest.

PMP: Do you think that the close connection that most regional people have to country and to weather and environment is a closer connection than we have in the city? Does it influence how you work and what you look for?

CF: It's been an interesting culture shock for me. I come from a community where if something happens, you pitch in and help. When I go to the UK, I go to all of these events and help out. People have been a little bit intimidated by that, thinking 'you're coming in here to try to take jobs away from people'. I just come from a community where things are happening, you're helping, like that's our job.

When I'm in the UK, I have to be outdoors. I didn't understand why I would get so sad over there; it's because there were buildings on my horizon. Where I come from, there are no buildings; I can always see sky. My brain is really affected by symbols and how much sky I can see. I chose to move to the

north of the UK and not to live in London, so that I could go climb mountains and be in the trees. It turns out that if you start regional, you may end up regional, even if you're overseas.

NOTES

- 1 CBH bins are grain storage silos in Western Australia.
- 2 See <https://www.strutdance.org.au/artists/annette-carmichael>.
- 3 See <https://www.circuitwest.com.au/>; <https://www.cacwa.org.au/advocacy-policy/articulate-western-australia-stories-2/ainsley-foulds>.
- 4 See <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/wildlife/2016/10/on-this-day-the-emu-wars-begin/>.