



## EP 9: Toward intercultural understanding and empathy

### Manal Ataya in conversation with Criena Gehrke

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[THEME MUSIC]

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**Criena Gehrke:** Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural urban life.

The series and supporting materials can be found at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net). And if you like our content, go on! Subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice. Today, I'm speaking to you from the land of the Kombumerri families of the Yugambeh language region. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, and I pay my deep respect to elders past, present and emerging across the many lands we are meeting on.

First Nations People are our original storytellers and the custodians of our culture. I'm Criena Gehrke, and my day job is Chief Executive Officer at HOTA, Home of the Arts, on the Gold Coast in Australia. Today, however, I get to take time out to do something the world needs, I think, more than ever right now: have a conversation, explore ideas, understand difference, and forge connections with incredible people across the globe.

Today, I am chatting with Manal Ataya, who for over a decade has been the Director General at the Sharjah Museums Authority. She's responsible for the overall management of 16 museums in the Emirate of Sharjah, UNESCO's cultural capital of the Arab world. Manal serves on numerous boards – including one of my personal favourites, the Global Cultural Districts Network, and she was awarded the Order of Arts and Letters (Ordre des Arts et des Lettres) by the Republic of France in 2018 for her significant contributions to culture. After my conversation with Manal, I'll be joined by Stephanie Fortunato for our key takeaways segments. So stay tuned.

Manal, welcome to The Three Bells!

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**Manal Ataya:** Thank you. It's wonderful to be here. And I appreciate that lovely introduction.



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**Criena Gehrke:** So we actually had the chance to catch up a few weeks ago, and I've been thinking about something you said then.

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**Criena Gehrke:** And it really resonated with me, as a way of starting this conversation today. And it was that, you love to ask people where they come from, because you said that it always leads to them telling their story, but also a sense of where they feel connected, you know, their sense of home and place.

So, you know what I'm going to ask you next. Manal, tell me, where do you come from?

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**Manal Ataya:** Wow, so one of the things we did talk about is that this answer to this question is never an easy one. I think there is, as I mentioned before, the short and then the long answer.

And uh, the short answer is never the good answer. It just, it gives you such a minimal amount of information. So it could be, it could be very easy for me to say, I'm this nationality or that, but I think the greater answer is the one that allows you to tell the story of your origins and where you've been and what you've done in your life and where you are today. And my story lies in a, in a greater context. So without getting too far back, I'm a mixture of two cultures. Uh, growing up in another culture and a person who has also lived in, in other countries and cultures.

So I'm, many identities. I'm a woman. I'm, I'm Muslim, I'm Arab. I'm also American. And I was born and brought up here in the UAE and have lived here most of my life, but I've also lived in the US and have travelled extensively in my lifetime. And my circle of friends come from all kinds of backgrounds and places of origin, et cetera.

And so, it's amazing when you look back, I think, at your history and where you're from, where you are now and where you hope to be in the future. There's a lot of stories there about how these different identities converge and how they come together. And um, I think every person has, usually, a very long story to tell.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Manal Ataya:** Um, so it's, that's the exciting part for me. And I love to hear how people find each other and how they're connected. Especially when people ask me like, Oh, how would your father have ever met your mother and I, and things like that and say, well, he went to college in the US and then got talking to my mother, and then she came over here and then, oh, that must've been, you know, a real shock for her.

I said, yes, it was. (laughs) She came to a very small country at the time, with a very small population and did not speak the language or know anything about the customs and had to sort of adapt and, and find a place within a culture that was very different from her own. And you know, this fascinates me, when you think about how people over time and throughout time had to do that with moving from place to place. And now today with globalisation, we do that all the time.



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**Criena Gehrke:** Is there a place through that story where you feel more connected?

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**Manal Ataya:** I think there is a sense of course that where you grow up for sure, will probably be where you feel the most connected, because it's where you know, your inculturation happens. It's where you, you begin to learn from your parents, from your family, from the community, from your education system sort of what your culture is, what your ideas are, your customs are, what the social behaviour of, you know, where you're from is.

So, that process which happens, you know, when you're, when you're young, when you're growing up, I think tends to be – at least for me anyway, the place that I feel most connected, which is Dubai here in the UAE. It's where I feel all my memories are most of them, you know, very wonderful memories of my childhood, et cetera. And then where I built my sort of deepest connections with friendships and um, people that I'd met as I was growing up. And then of course now with my professional career, it's been one where I have forged very strong relationships with people, or let's say peers, professionally.

And so much of my life has been dedicated to my works. I've put a lot of my energy into what I do. And so that keeps the connection very strong. However, I made very deep connections when I lived in the US as well. And I have very close friends there and there's, there's a part of me when I'm there that seems familiar because when I did live there, I had to find a way to somewhat, um – I wouldn't use the word assimilate, but really I would say try to adapt what was the sort of host, you know, dominant culture there and make sure that I was aware of, what was happening there so that I could sort of fit in better, even though I retained my own cultural values and sense of who I was, but I also had to kind of ensure I was able to fit in with another one at the same time.

So when I go back there, certain elements feel very familiar to me because I learned how to do that over a period of about six years of living in the US so, yeah, it's a, it's an interesting thing when you have to learn another culture uh, if that makes sense.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, it's interesting sense of what is culture, isn't it? Because even in you telling me just then about your different experiences, living in different places, you spoke of assimilation, which I think is an interesting concept, but also this notion of having to learn a culture.

**Manal Ataya:** Yeah.

**Criena Gehrke:** And I've been really thoughtful about what is culture, and what does it mean to us, and can you define it? And have we, somehow in the modern world removed ourselves, or we see it as a distant thing or as an add on? And I'm just really interested in your thoughts about that, because I think it's important if we're talking about cultural districts and our role was cultural leaders, I wonder if we are spending enough time really thinking about what culture is.

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**Manal Ataya:** Uh, well, I would say culture is, um, I look at it in two ways. You have sort of



the, I guess more obvious definition of culture being certain ideas that you have, social behaviour beliefs, knowledge, customs, things like that. So they're key elements of what your culture might be.

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**Manal Ataya:** But then there's a part of it, which is how do you represent that culture or how do you reflect that culture? And that's where the idea of the arts comes in, sort of how we write about, or tell our stories through literature. It's about how we express ourselves through visual arts or to performance or to music, for example. So these are the mediums in which culture can be understood.

But I think really trying to understand the core of what culture is, and really understanding why people believe certain things or why people value certain things or why they have certain ideas, that's not always, I think, given the time. I don't think people tend to really look into that very much. I think it's, it can be maybe, not, might not seem very interesting to people.

It might seem very tiresome, maybe even a bit too complex to understand why there are certain ideas there, but I think it's an important part of life to understand, really understand the complexities of what a culture is, and why people have certain behaviours and feelings about certain things.

It's very important to understand that we're always looking at things from social constructs and from how societies and communities construct certain ideas. And therefore when we look at culture, we have to, I mean, the easy one, like I mentioned is, you know, enjoying the arts and enjoying things and how things are being expressed.

But I think fundamentally is looking at the deeper part of it. What are they really trying to say? And uh, what about those beliefs or those ideas do you find interesting? Do you find okay? And what are the things that kind of challenge you, or make you feel uncomfortable? And trying to deal with that, I think, is the informed part of really understanding other people, and how they think differently about the way they view the world, and what they do within the world, and how they practice what they do.

So this is the challenge I think, in today's world, is that culture is everywhere. There's no way you can kind of avoid it. You know, we have to, I think, understand people better.

We used to take more time to do that in everyday life.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Have you got a good example of where you've had that experience or you've been able to lead a programme or present something where you really thought, you know what, that programme or that exhibition or that beautiful piece of music or theatre actually changed the way that people see or the way that they feel about another culture, or otherness...

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**Manal Ataya:** I think in my life, of course there've been many. Examples for myself personally, there's been texts I've read, or things that I've watched, movies I've seen that have really made me feel differently about things or, or really understand things from a



different point of view. And I think it's probably why whenever I watch anything, even a simple show on Netflix now, I'll look and see sometimes the deeper meaning behind a lot of what's being shown.

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**Manal Ataya:** Of course, when they're in my mind, like a good show and I see that there's something there that's really trying to talk about or trigger a response about how you think about people, whether it's social class or gender or otherwise. So it's always interesting once, once you have that in your mind, that process of thinking about the layers of people, the layers of the complexity of identity, then you'll never see anyone just as they are at face value.

And I think that's a great thing. And it's something you learned to do and then after that, it just happens um, naturally.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Also love that you're talking about Netflix, you know, we've started off with quite an intense philosophical conversation, and then there we go, Netflix. (laughs)

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**Manal Ataya:** Well no, Netflix has, I mean, you know, it's funny, um – I'm not here to promote any particular show but why that was in my mind is, I don't know if you've seen White Lotus, but I watched that recently and I thought, what an excellent show for me. It's, it's kind of comes off as, you know, a dark comedy, but really it talks a lot about actually identity, talks a lot about privilege, and about racism, and this, the dichotomy of us and them.

It's wonderfully presented in a very simple sort of setting and scenario that anyone can relate to. But what you see, the layers of what the conversations that are had and the conversations that are not had tell you a lot about how people actually feel about a lot of different aspects of, of those um, things I mentioned like racism and class and white privilege and things like that. Really, there's a lot there. Um, I think the more you, you understand these things, the more you see the symbolism and a lot of these types of shows or whatever it might be.

And for me, this is this is another way of showing or expressing ideas, right? So, um, coming back to your question about how, you know, we do certain things to kind of, let's say, have these types of dialogues is through having programmes and, you know, exhibitions that allow people to see similarities or to see differences in other cultures.

And that will bring about conversations um, or interesting reactions, let's say to what they find out about how people from a particular culture perceive a similar notion. So for example, we had an exhibition. It was um, different um, objects from around the world.

But uh, what connected them was the fact that they were all made through people who migrated and connected with other people.

So none of these things would have been created had they not been an exchange with another culture. I think what surprises a lot of people when they come to see exhibitions



like that is how long that's been happening. This idea of globalisation makes you think that this is a more recent thing.

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**Manal Ataya:** But the only difference is, with globalisation it's more rapid and it's at a much um, let's say, much larger scale. But historically there has still, you know, there has been globalisation for thousands of years. And so, you know, this concept I think intrigues people and they find it really fascinating and it, in a way kind of makes them feel that more, I would say positive.

They realise that, you know, people could do this thousands of years ago where they could sort of embrace other people and integrate and find positive that can come out of that. Then, you know, why aren't we doing more of that today? Um, I think with anything historically, you see colonialism and its effects, imperialism and its effects, but then you also see the other side to it, which is where some really beautiful things have happened, where there's been a respect for the other group or ethnicity or, or peoples that are in a particular place and where they work side-by-side and they create beautiful things together or integration happens in a way that is positive. It's not forced. And I think these are the things that we're trying to remind people that we can do this that way too. Because today I think we're living in a world where we still have this issue where people are trying to force something over another.

And I think that can never lead to a happy situation for any party. I think it will always lead to um, under the surface kind of resentment and anger. And then you see sort of the terrible effects of that, that can come out later on.

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**Crieda Gehrke:** Do you think that that's been sped up and exacerbated by the world that we live in, with rapid information, social media, our communication channels? I worry that our stories are so fast and so diluted or filled with moral indignation, that the stories that are associated truly deeply richly with culture or through art are getting lost somewhere in the white noise.

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**Manal Ataya:** I think, I think that's true. I think, you know, someone, said something to me over a dinner once recently within the last two months, and I never thought of it that way, but we were talking about something and I, it was a sort of political kind of situation. And, and I said, oh, well, I was reading this, you know, on, on one of the social media channels and the person who was sitting in front of me, happened to be a journalist.

And they said, Manal, that's not journalism, that's media.

**Crieda Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Manal Ataya:** I said, what do you mean? And he says, well, that's just media content. That's not actual journalism. I said, there's a difference between media and journalism? And he said, yes, there's a big difference between it. And we had a very interesting conversation about how the difference being, what you just talked about.



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**Manal Ataya:** There is media out there, which is just stuff that's created, put together, which isn't in fact-based necessarily, or most cases isn't at all. It can be very sensational. It can be very emotional. It can be whatever, whatever the person creating it kind of wants to do with it. What do they want the outcome of people to do when they consume this media?

And a lot of it, as you said, is just a lot of noise. But journalism he was talking about is, you know, actual facts, it's actual, real, time spent trying to understand or to decipher, to figure out what is going on and how to put it in, into the context of which people can really understand the situation at hand.

So these are really important parts of, yes, figuring out that, you know, today's world we do have majority of what we see is just media content. It's just stuff that's out there. And a lot of it, as we know with fake news, is not real. And that's the scary part of trying to figure out what's real.

And I asked him that, I said, you know, how do you figure out what's real? That's the tough thing. Cause you, you read so many different things and everything kind of tells you something a little different. But that's what he talked to me and sort of this conundrum that we find ourselves in, it's sort of like most people don't have enough time, you know, to really look at everything and to look at everything with real detail.

So that's why media consumption is so effective because it just gives you soundbites whether real or not, or the full picture. And that's usually what people consume and that's how they get a certain opinion or formulate their opinion about a particular topic and then they go with it, but it's, it's actually very dangerous.

And I think that, that happens with cultures today. I think what happens today is that we get soundbites about what people are and who they are, but we don't really understand them at a deeper level. And so this is where we formulate opinions, I think, and worse, we can formulate stereotypes or biases about people about who they are. And then that, of course, to me, leads to a lot of tension and a lot of problems, especially if you have to live with that group or those uh, those types of people who are coming into, let's say another, you know, your country, that is your native country.

Um, so it's always, to me um, it's a part of really taking the time, as I mentioned earlier, to listen to people to really understand where they're coming from and understand how difficult it must be for someone to have their own values and systems and beliefs, and then come into another place and try to understand that and adapt to it and try to take on some of it so that they fit in.

That's really hard for people. And I think, people who don't have to do that work or haven't had to yet anyway, don't usually understand how difficult that is for other people. And I think when you find, when you understand that, you would have a lot more compassion for people, which is what I think it really boils down to this, to have compassion and empathy for others and trying to understand really, just how difficult and complex things are and taking the time to really get your head around things better than just taking a little bit of sound bites from, like you said, that white noise that we just seem to be bombarded with all the time.



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MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Criena Gehrke:** Is that notion of compassion and empathy, I mean, you display those every single day, but is that also what's driving your deep commitment to young people and education? Like, does it need to start at a very young age, that notion of understanding through culture and the arts, and what's our responsibility as those of us that are leading those cultural districts?

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**Manal Ataya:** I do think it's something you have to teach young people um, from children from wondering younger so that they become empathetic adults.

I really believe that. And I think with our exhibitions and our programmes and things that we do at the, really at the core, I guess, to be honest, lies this idea of, you know, the more that we show and expose young people as part of their education uh, by coming to the museums about different people and cultures and understanding emotions through what they're seeing, that they will become better at empathy, but also at understanding and accepting diversity.

So for example, we have these um, emotion cards, we call them. So we have a couple of cards and um, they relate to a particular painting and the, you know, on the wall, in our permanent collection. So we have a number of different uh, emotions, let's say sadness, and there's a particular painting we have.

And we say, you know, what is sadness, you know, we ask, and this is what we asked, sort of, let's say the age group, sort of young teenagers, have you ever felt sad? You know, uh, what does that feeling like? And these are really important exercises. Imagine, you know, young people talking about what makes them sad in front of others and trying to explain, you know, what that feeling is and why we will often feel that feeling.

But how do we deal with that feeling and things like that. It's an amazing exercise to watch because often you will see how people will automatically smile and relate to each other because they'd be like, oh, that's exactly the same thing that makes me sad. Or that's the same thing that happened to me, whether it was feeling sad because they lost somebody or they failed at something, you know, or something like that.

So it's really, just that simple exercise in itself can be really changing, I think life changing in terms of the growth of a young adult or, you know, a child when they are prompted and helped to understand, for example, feelings and how to think about that. Especially in a group setting and with others, because that's, when you really understand how other people are similar to you and how they have certain fears or whatever it might be, but also how they might differ.

And then you see that that, you see it in a different way. And I think that's extremely important. And so we do a lot of that kind of work in our museums and especially also with including inclusiveness and being including of people with autism or other kinds of disabilities within the group of everyone.





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**Manal Ataya:** So, there is no differentiation. And we talk about how maybe people with certain disabilities need to have this or have that. And this is part of the empathy process. I think when you start segregating people and, you know, labelling people, I think you start to get into a really bad situation.

And the empathy starts to I think, kind of disappears. It's when people are close to one another, and are in a way forced to be close to one another, that they are, have to deal and speak to that person and try to understand their point of view. I always think about college or like when I did my leadership training course, I remember a few years ago I had to basically live with people for like five days, you know, and I remember thinking: The first, day or second day, I said, oh my god, this reminds me of college. You know, when you're forced to live in a dorm room with people who are just so different from you and you really, you literally feel like, you know, they're crawling up your body because they're, you're getting annoyed with all the things that they do, right?

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

Like, oh, that's so irritating the way they like eat their food, or it's irritating that they, I don't know, they whistle or they hum or, you know, all these kinds of silly things. And then of course there's even the more serious things like, oh, they say something in the class and you're like, I can't believe they have that kind of opinion about the world. Like, oh, that's terrible, or, you know. But, after 2, 3, 4 or 5 days you realise those things have gone away, you've, you begin to, you know, take that breath and say, that this is life, you know, that's everyone's going to be different. And we have, you have to – and I tell myself that, you have to deal with that.

You have to let those things go and you now also have to understand how lucky you are, that you're with people who are very different from you. So you can really see how a particular issue that you think everyone thinks the same about actually many people don't think the same about, and you get the chance to ask them how come you feel this way.

And you learn from that. And it might change your view afterwards, or it might make you stronger in the view that you have. But I think that's such a gift and we very rarely get to have that. I think, you know, in college, if you happen to be in college and be able to live in a dorm is one of the situations that forces that on you.

If you have to, you have to live with a big family with different personalities and different uh, likes and dislikes. But I think there's a lot of people who don't get those chances. And um, and they lose the ability to handle those situations. I know, like I said, when I mentioned what happened to me, I really felt crazy the first day. (laughs) I've almost thought I'd have a meltdown. And, and then I thought to myself, I've been, I've done this before. I'm just out of practice, you know, and it's okay.

And the fact that it's bothering me, means that it's working. So it's a good thing, you know, if this was, if this didn't affect me at all, then I probably wasn't really getting anything good out of it. So part of the process for, I think, real transformative, you know, positive change in your life as a person, but also how you're going to be in society and in society at large and do good for society, is how you're willing to deal with all those uncomfortable conversations and uncomfortable people.



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**Manal Ataya:** And you know, all those little things that, that might bother you, but how you overcome them to get to a point of, real uh, respect and conversation, you know, that really, I think could help.

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**Criena Gehrke:** So what do we need to do to try and encourage that sort of culture and environment? Because I'm going to be a little bit provocative. I have to sell tickets at HOTA, right? So I need to drive revenue into my precinct and institutions. And my reflection is that sometimes things that make people uncomfortable don't sell.

**Manal Ataya:** Yeah.

**Criena Gehrke:** So there's something in that for me about where does it start, and how do you get comfortable with discomfort – like that thought of you being in that leadership course and you're so lovely and generous and full of humanity and caring. And it's like, get me out of here. (laughs)

**Manal Ataya:** (laughs) Yes, exactly.

**Criena Gehrke:** In a way probably is because you have a deep commitment to being ok being uncomfortable.

So then, you know, we programme things or we curate amazing exhibitions, or we want to tell these stories and support these incredible artists and creatives from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences to tell these stories, and people don't come and see them because it makes them really uncomfortable or they go, that's not for me.

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**Manal Ataya:** Exactly. I totally understand that issue because we have, I mean, it's something I think many of us face in life in general, you know, whatever sector you work in. But I think particularly for, let's say the culture and arts, if we're going to focus on that, I think there's a number of ways to go about it.

And I do, I do agree completely that yes, if things appear to be something that will be uncomfortable for people they tend to, yes, move away from it or not want to engage in it. And also as you said, something that they think doesn't relate to them. So I think with museum programming and stuff, as you mentioned, I do think it requires, it has to be done in increments. I don't think you could expect to sort of change the world or change people in sort of one with one exhibition or, or with one particular event.

It has to be done in a consistent way, and it has to be done also in a way that I have to say um, there's a little covert. You have to be a little bit smart about how you do it. Yes. So like, I wouldn't necessarily, if I wanted to do a uh, talk about let's say racism, I wouldn't call it a talk about racism.

I might use different words. Um, I might use an analogy or a line from a poem, something that would hook people and be like, oh, that sounds interesting. I wonder what that's about. And then when they get there, then they're going to hear a little bit more about what it is and yeah, so people might leave, but I think a lot of people would stay and then that'd be like, oh wow, this was quite fascinating, and I'm glad I'm here.



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**Manal Ataya:** I probably wouldn't have come if I had known what it was really going to be about. So for me, always in my philosophy about the museums and what we do, and what we show is at least first, we expose people to things.

As I said, whether it's incremental or, in a, in a kind of sly marketing way, then you go to the next phase, which is help them understand what they're actually seeing or are listening to. And that comes through the programmes and the kind of added educational, you know, cushioning that you give that people really get what's going on.

And you encourage them to learn on their own and to look up things or to watch something or whatever, or listen to some podcasts, whatever it might be that will help them to gain a better perspective. And of course for me, the greatest part is in that little window of transformation of, well, you know what, maybe I'm, I think differently about this now, or maybe now I actually care about this issue. Maybe now, you know, I want to do something about this.

And then of course, then you get to the final stage, which is the ideal stage, which is action. You know, something actually happens. The person actually feels like they can do something to either change themselves, change society, to change how they raise their children, how they, or how they talk to their friends about a particular topic. And for me, that's fascinating.

And of course, for us and in a museum, that's usually the part we don't see because that happens in, you know, people's private spaces necessarily, most of the time. But I have to believe that it happens because I have seen it happened to me. I've seen it happen to many people around me, and I know that it works, and for me, that's what pushes me to keep doing what we do in whatever way we can to keep that interest and incremental change uh, happening, by just allowing people to learn how to critically think and to question things about themselves and about the world around them.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Do you ever lose faith in that belief? At the moment, you know, we live in a very strange time. When you think about what's happening, in Afghanistan. When you think that we're living through a global pandemic, you know. I'll be honest, I've had that loss of confidence in faith a couple of times over the past 18 months where I think I've dedicated my whole life to something.

And I believe in it very deeply. And I live my life according to that, but it doesn't seem to make any difference.

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**Manal Ataya:** I would lie if I said that I didn't have those feelings too. I think that that's completely normal and I've definitely had those feelings um, many times in my life, including even recently. I remember it was, when was it? It was probably a few months ago when it was sort of, uh, just a really bad time. It was either July or June when it was just like, it was just bad news after another.

I remember like I thought to myself, my god, like, you know, everywhere you look, there's either a natural disaster or violence, you know, or something else.



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**Manal Ataya:** And when you see that happening, for sure, it makes you feel really down and it makes you think like, what am I doing? And does any of this actually matter? And does it help? Or are we completely doomed, you know? So I definitely feel those feelings and I think everyone does, but then if you really feel like, let's say helpless, and hopeless really.

I think all of those feelings are valid, but they don't allow for anything to change because there are, those are the types of emotions that you just sort of wallow in and to me, they're like muddy waters. They're just really thick, and it's hard to walk in them and you just get tired.

Every step that you try to take, you get more and more tired. It just pulls you down. I feel like when you're in a situation in the world where all this is happening, you have to believe that these things can, can get better, that these situations can change. And that the way to do that, I think is, is, trying to be understanding, trying to forgive, trying to figure out how to embrace other people when they're in their hard, going through their hardest times and how to give love, support, whatever it is that you need from a, from the small scale, personal scale, to a larger, you know, larger scale as a country um, who might take in refugees or, or help send aid or whatever it might be, I think we have to believe that those things will make a difference and that they will matter.

And they do. And I do believe that all of those things do. I think if we didn't believe that, it would be very easy for us to kind of become very complacent. And just as I said, feel kind of be stuck in the mud and not really go anywhere. And for me, that's very dangerous. If we get into that kind of a mindset, it's very hard to get out of it.

So, I have to always be fighting against that, I think. And I think the pandemic definitely, you know, added that whole other layer of feeling helpless and hopeless, but having said that, we've got a vaccine, it's proven effective in majority of most cases. Normalcy is being reintroduced back into a lot of places and countries. So, you know, we're moving in the right direction in some situations. So I always feel like even in thinking of a pandemic, and how bad and scary it was and still is, but people thinking that there is a solution or there is some way to get out of it.

Those people have allowed us to get to where we are, where we have vaccinations and we are able to save lives and we are able to just start to, you know, go out again and be productive and do things we need to do and live some kind of a normal life again. And hopefully it'll only get better. So I think, you know, that mindset is vital if we ever want positive change to occur. Every situation, as bad as it can get, there's always a way to find resolution um, and find some, some form of a peace or of change that, that can make something better, even if it might take a very long time.

[00:36:18]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:36:28]

**Criena Gehrke:** Take me 20 years into the future. What's your hope for that future? And what do you think that this moment where we've really had to think long and hard about culture, our role as cultural leaders, what we bring to society, humanity, that idea of otherness and our moral responsibility to support, change, and transformation, what does it look like in 20 years? And what's your hope for that?



[00:36:55]

**Manal Ataya:** Oh, it's, it's hard. You know, I, I don't think the future will all be, you know, rainbows and roses.

I think we'll continue to have some serious issues come about. That's what history has shown us. It hasn't really changed, but it's, what has changed has been the response to those issues and whether or not we're able to mitigate a lot of them and whether or not we're able to minimise the suffering and the pain of some of those issues.

And I think in history, I feel like I have seen that things are definitely better off than they were in the past. So the same situation happening 50 years ago, or a hundred years ago happening today, to me is better off than what it would have been before, because there are more people who are committed to peace or more people who are committed to finding uh, solutions and, and finding ways in which to work together as a global community.

There's better communication. There's better, let's say um, adherence to international laws and international human rights and things like that. And I think that from the cultural side, there's so much more permeation of cultures and, and, I think that's allowed for a better future, because I think people sitting around the table now and in the future, I hope they will not be the same kind of person.

They will be different types of people from different walks of life, from different life experiences. And I think that diversity will allow for freedom and better solutions and better approaches to dealing with whatever issues we have, global affairs and global you know, challenges.

I think, I think you have to think positively about that. I think as much as I said, you know, the history has shown us that we still often get the same problems. History has shown us that we tend to handle problems better than we had in the past, which is, which is a great thing. And I think we have to keep that in mind and also believe that culture plays such a huge part at the core, at changing the way people perceive other people and giving them this ability to kind of be in someone else's shoes.

And I cannot emphasise enough how much that changes how you live your life, but also how you decide and make decisions about certain things from a micro or macro level and how you, how you respond to issues. Because you begin to not think about the 'us and them', but you think about 'us as one', as a collective. And that, starting from that point of view, and from that perspective, changes completely how you react to whatever's going on in the world, um, whether good or bad, particularly that, that's not so good.

So I think the future holds for me, I hope, a lot of positivity for everyone. And I think if we just, again, approach everything from a, from a lens of love and compassion, rather than fear and we look at things from a place of, you know, we can all learn to understand and, to also you know, to really be apologetic and be aware of our mistakes. You know, there's, we didn't talk about it, but, you know, I know this in most recent times, there's a lot of this, what they call cancel culture going on.



[00:40:20]

**Manal Ataya:** And a lot of people who have been, sort of the responsibility of what they are saying, what they're doing, they're paying the price for that. I think that's good. But at the same token, I think people have genuinely made mistakes that are genuine from their, from their actual ignorance or, or otherwise.

And we have to be more compassionate about people who've done that, especially if they're willing to apologise and to make amends and to continue to ask people about how they can change and be better people. And I think that's how, that's the kind of approach we need. We need to make people feel more comfortable to ask questions and to feel that they can have conversations with people rather than being afraid of offending them or afraid of saying the wrong thing, but to actually be comfortable doing that.

That's what I mean by love, really. It's just, it's thinking the best of people and trying to help people evolve and grow rather than sort of punish and put them in a box. And I think that's something that I see more of, which is really good and I hope that that continues in the future.

[00:41:25]

**Criena Gehrke:** Manal, it's been an absolute pleasure having this conversation with you. I wish we had emotion cards like you had with your secondary school students.

**Manal Ataya:** (laughs) Oh yeah.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) And I would say my emotion card that I take away from this is optimism. You know, I think as long as we remain faithful to our sense of humanity that we display that curiosity that you're talking about, that we don't judge others.

We wonder at their otherness and the story of that then we are right to be optimistic about the future. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with The Three Bells and I can't wait to see you some way in the world in real life soon.

[00:42:11]

**Manal Ataya:** Thank you. This has been so enjoyable and I love that you, you referred to me or, or what I've just said, being optimistic because I've never been considered an optimist, but I think that's what's happened with my life. I think life changes and experiences and that part of the growth that I talked about is what will allow you to turn into whatever you want to turn into.

It's all about what work you're willing to put in and what you're willing to, do um, the uncomfortable stuff that we talked about, to change how you feel and how you think for the better. And I think all of us can, because if I can change from being quite a pessimist in my younger years to the optimist I am now – I was cautiously optimistic and now I'm pretty much of optimist.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Manal Ataya:** I think, I think that says a lot, you know, I think people would be shocked at how much I've changed in, in, you know a span of 15 years or so. So everyone can change.



[00:43:03]

**Manal Ataya:** Everyone can change for the better. I think that's what I always want to leave with. And I think the work that we do is one vehicle to help allow people to change. It's one way that we give tools and the space, you know, physically and symbolically for people to change and I know that it can get better a hundred percent. So, um –

**Criena Gehrke:** A hundred percent.

**Manal Ataya:** A hundred percent. Yes. I'm saying um, I'm telling myself. (laughs) That is my goal. So thank you so much I really appreciate it.

[00:43:33]

**Criena Gehrke:** Listeners, if you want more check out [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net) to find external references and other resources linked to this episode and to Manal's work. But first, stick around for a conversation between myself and the wonderful Stephanie Fortunato as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:43:51]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:44:05]

**Criena Gehrke:** Hello, Stephanie.

[00:44:07]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Hi Criena, so nice to be joined with you once again in the airwaves.

[00:44:13]

**Criena Gehrke:** So, thanks for joining me today to have a chat about that conversation with Manal. I've been thinking about it quite a bit since we recorded that and you know, that notion of place of belonging, of community, of identity – it was a very, I think intimate and rich conversation. And I guess I'm just wondering what, how does that translate for you?

[00:44:40]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Yeah, I so appreciated the conversation and the flow between you and Manal and the ways that you talked about the value and necessity of cross cultural experiences and exchanges – not only to develop a more compassionate community, but also for ourselves as individuals.

And, you know, it really had me thinking about the work that we do here at the City of Providence: to create structures. So that way people can have opportunities to participate, to share their voice and to make sure that the structures are transparent are equitable and that they foster a sense of inclusion. One thing that we've done over the past couple of years is work on a Commemorative Works policies.

So Providence is not alone in thinking about our monuments, our markers, our memorials and what to do about it. You know, there are plenty of these monuments that were put up by people who had access to money and to power and privilege. And there are monuments in public spaces that just shouldn't be there anymore.



[00:45:47]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** And so, you know, we've been really wrestling with what to do with some of these objects. And so we've spent the past couple of years coming up with a commemorative works policy that is really a forum for public participation and public discourse about who and what we commemorate and where. And so much of this conversation really is about understanding that, you know, nothing in cities is more constant than change.

And so, I was thinking of about this process that we've created for participation as a way of really broadly thinking about civic engagement and inviting people into the conversation, because so much of this is about creating gateways for people to feel like their voice matters, right. And I got that so much from Manal's work and the exhibitions that she spoke about in that interview.

[00:46:44]

**Criena Gehrke:** How has that felt for you in Providence with your community? Because Manal also spoke around the fact that stories and history is so important, that's a really vital part to culture. And so when you're talking about commemorative sculptures and commemoration, has there been any conversation with your community about losing those stories?

[00:47:05]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Oh, my gosh. Yes. I mean, it's been interesting, right? There's such a fear that we're erasing history or trying to change the record when really, what the conversations so often are about, are about new learnings or new perspectives, or, you know, voices that have been silenced. And they just haven't been part of the conversation.

And so it's that broadening and that expansion, there's such an abundance of stories to be told. And it's such a rich opportunity, but it's not easy, right? I think you guys had a great conversation about how uncomfortable it is sometimes to step into this work and how careful we have to be sort of about setting up parameters so that people can bring their true and authentic selves. And often, you know, it's the people who have been historically marginalised, who've been left out of those conversations, being mindful to centre those experiences and not to put those fears at the heart of decisions that are being made, right. And so I, I think that this work is really hard actually. And it's when it's hard that it feels most uh, generative in some ways.

[00:48:15]

**Criena Gehrke:** It's uncomfortable work. There is no doubt about that. And it often responds to that sense of communities who have experienced otherness in quite a painful way. And so I really appreciate you sharing with us that project that you're undertaking. Cause I can imagine that it's full of debate and discourse and heat in it at times.

What's the role of the artist when it comes to really engaging with communities, to creating a sense of place or growing those stories?





[00:48:51]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** You know, it's often our artists who are the sort of harbingers of the truth. I always think about it that way.

And over the past couple of years, we have actually employed artists as facilitators of community conversation. And so the artists, who, you know, I mean, these are our creative problem solvers, right? These are the ones who actually make me most optimistic that there are solutions for some of these intractable and divisive conversations that we're so mired in all the time.

Um, but the artists are then able to step into the role of brokering consensus or having some of those hard conversations that when the city is present, we, we just have, there's too much there and we can't get past that to get to the future solutions and forward looking pathways for very different community conversations.

So I think artists have a role that, you know, it sort of extends beyond the products that we so often associate with an artist's work. It's about the creative process itself. And I think that process is so central to all of these community conversations, right. So being open to the possibilities that can come from new ideas from being in exchange with new cultures or new experiences. And I think Manal spoke so clearly about the power of that, you know, at a young age. But I think it's really important to find ways to make sure those experience are accessible throughout all stages of life, right, it's a lifelong journey for, for understanding there.

And you know, one thing that you put to Manal that I wish we have had more time to really get into was this idea about, how do you make hard or challenging thought provoking work commercially viable, because as leaders of cultural institutions at the end of the day, we do have to bill the house, right. What were you thinking about after you had that conversation in terms of the response?

[00:50:57]

**Criena Gehrke:** I was thinking that it's an ongoing tension, isn't it? And in some of the previous conversations we've been having, you know, with Jesse around that research that Sundance had undertaken in the role of the artist and how to support them. Then there is this balancing act that you need to do between artists support, community engagement, driving commercial return.

For us, we've also got being a recreational space, being a civic space, you know, like that's a lot of different threads that you have to undertake. I don't know that there's any easy answer. You know, life is filled – when you're an arts leader, with discussions around audience development and audience engagement.

I've kind of resolved that audiences for the most part, they love a musical. They love a comedian. They love live music, you know, and there's no getting around that. And so at HOTA, we lean into that. We say, you know, there is most definitely audiences for that. Go hard, drive that revenue. And then that revenue actually supports all of the other community-based projects that we do.

I'd also argue, those things aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. I think sometimes we get tied up with what's that perfect storm that you can create.



[00:52:17]

**Criena Gehrke:** I'd say that people coming to listen to great rock and roll is great community engagement. You know, if you love it, if it makes you feel good and if it sells tickets, then let's do that. So I think that sometimes we get tied up in this notion of, it needs to be all things to all people. Instead of going, there is a commercial business that we run.

Then there are other things that we do that are the very DNA of our places. Having said that, for me, there is a perfect storm and it was right at the beginning of the HOTA journey when we had Laurie Anderson in residence with us. And she came into the Parkland and she performed her incredible concert for dogs.

So we had 2000 people with their dogs, the dogs howling at Laurie Anderson doing this great sort of alternative music gig. People who had never been to HOTA and who had never had that experience, and wouldn't really understand the cultural significance of someone like Laurie – they're having a great time rocking out!

And I thought, there you go: Community, dogs, a hook that meant that people came to have that experience, a phenomenal artist in the sunshine, in the Parkland. It just doesn't get any better than that. So, and we, we raised money from it mainly through bar sales. So, so, there is at times a perfect storm that you can create, but it's an interesting tension, I think that we all face.

[00:53:53]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Totally, yeah, I love that. That invitation is actually not that different than some of the other ideas that Manal shared through, you know, through her conversation there, and actually reminds me of what Diane Ragsdale was talking about, when she was talking about balancing the financials, the aesthetics and the ethics, you know, and how performing arts institutions have to always take that sort of Venn diagram into consideration.

So, I so appreciate your take on that. Thanks for sharing that back. (laughs)

[00:54:22]

**Criena Gehrke:** I was also reflecting through that conversation and the other themes that are beginning to arise through these great Three Bells podcasts. I'm wondering whether we need a manifesto, you know, these things keep coming up about, be kind and respectful, be curious, respect otherness, engage deeply with your community.

Understand your responsibility as cultural leaders and place artists at the centre of what you do, because I loved Manal talking about, as we all know, that art is the representation in the storytelling around culture. And, you know, I'm really thoughtful that as we have these discussions, come the manifesto and come the revolution.

And I think my other key takeaway, was that the opportunity to stop and pause sometimes. And I have this with you whenever we do these key takeaways or we get to chat offline. The opportunity as cultural leaders in a time of extreme change, volatility, lots of conversations about our roles and responsibilities, the opportunity to just pause, to learn more about us as humans, to be open and honest about some of the challenges we're facing or the very humans that we are. I think are as important as the strategies and the projects and the initiatives that we're undertaking.



[00:55:51]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I couldn't agree more. And, you know, I think that, like one of the other things I was thinking about was this idea of like, what are the invitations that we make to actually connect? And how can we do that? You know, this podcast is actually a very cool opportunity to travel with people through their, through their days.

But, you know, what are the questions that we can ask? I was reminded actually of a project that we did a few years ago – a community table. You know, this is a 200 person community table that we set in the middle of our transit hub at the centre of our city, and we asked an artist to lead conversation for that event.

And so she came up with some beautiful questions about mealtimes, and it was just a way that you could connect the downtown worker who might be commuting home, saw this table, sat down; the arts patron who sought out this experience; and then sort of the itinerant community who was just in the transit hub and came to sit down for a meal.

All the questions around, you know, what were the things you said before you sat down to eat as a child, or what were some of your favourite holiday meals? They were so divergent in some ways that the responses were, but these questions connected us. So I think that's what you're talking about, right?

Like how do we, as cultural leaders ask questions that, that are universal enough to make us think about the ways that our experiences are the same and how can we push each other from our difference-based perspectives to kind of take that collective experience to a more progressive or more change-oriented direction.

So that way we can together solve those big questions about the crisis that we face as, as individuals, you know, and the other reckonings that we need to address as a community. None of us can do that alone.

[00:57:47]

**Criena Gehrke:** Creating places and spaces for shared experience. And there's nothing like a cup of tea in Australia to prompt those conversations. Stephanie, it's always an absolute delight. Again, thank you to Manal for her insights and for sharing her stories with us. I can't wait to chat to you again soon.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I look forward to it, Criena.

[00:58:13]

**Criena Gehrke:** The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net).

And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform of choice. My name's Criena Gehrke. Thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:58:37]

THEME MUSIC

