



EP 10: On storytelling, leadership, and wisdom

Wesley Enoch 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 and urban life.

The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net and if you like our content, then tell your friends, 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 Yugambah language region. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, and pay my 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 culture.

I'm Criena Gehrke and I've got a fantastic day job, which is Chief Executive Officer at HOTA, Home of the Arts on the Gold Coast. But today I get to indulge in one of my favourite pastimes, which is great conversations. And I am joined by the wonderful Wesley Enoch.

Wesley is a writer and director. He has been artistic director of Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival. Wesley is a proud Noonuccal Nuugi man and has been responsible for some of the most iconic indigenous theatre we have seen on Australian stages. He's also a cultural leader, a strategist, and some would say a provocateur.

Wesley, welcome to The Three Bells.

[00:01:40]

Wesley Enoch: Thanks for having me. Three bells, that sounds kind of ominous.

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Criena Gehrke: (laughs) It is, there's a long story. And I really encourage people to go to www.thethreebells.net because it actually tells you the story of how we came to be known as the three bells.



The Three Bells: a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

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[00:01:53]

Criena Gehrke: But you know, it's sparkling and it's going to ring out across the globe, Wesley. Now, whereas I was listening to another podcast recently doing some research because even though you and I have known each other a long time, I do like to come to these conversations prepared and to see what else you're saying out there in the world.

And you were reflecting on the fact that in recent times, you're beginning to be referred to as Uncle Wesley, which in indigenous communities is the sign of respect, of wisdom, of knowledge. And I was really, reflecting on that because we've known each other a long time. So I think we'll come to that in terms of the journey, but I want to go back to the very start, where you were a starry eyed, young actor. And I was working my first professional stage management gig with Queensland Theatre Company. And it may still have been Royal Queensland Theatre Company at the time – I can't quite recall. And it was this play called One Woman's Song.

And it was actually quite ground-breaking at the time. It had been commissioned by the Royal Queensland Theatre Company. And it told the story of your great art, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and it also had in one of the lead roles, a very bright eyed, Deborah Mailman. So two of these incredible indigenous performers who have gone on to really, in some ways tell most of the, most significant stories of Australia and of indigenous culture in recent times.

And I guess I'm just interested in your reflection of that, cause that was the really early days where it wasn't saying necessarily as important or vital to be telling those stories in Australia.

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Wesley Enoch: Mm, I reckon you got to go back to 1988 and the so-called bicentennial year, and it's interesting between 88 and 1993, which is the year that play was being formed - One Woman's Song, that five-year period was pretty much the beginning of this kind of analysis, the self-analysis as a country to say, what is our Aboriginal history and that how do we bring it to the fore? How do we make sure that it's not just about this kind of colonial narrative? So you see um, all the Aboriginal theatre companies that exist now started in that period of time as well. And there was this real energy to make sure our stories were going to be told.

It was also the birth of our indigenous film industry in a kind of very considered way and there's a sense of – It's our time. We have to do this.

There's this wonderful sense of energy because we were mixing the politics with the storytelling. I remember Auntie Kath, we called her Auntie Kath, Kath Walker - Oodgeroo Noonuccal and she had two sons; Uncle Vivian, who was a storyteller, you know, an incredible artist, writer and her other son, Denis, Uncle Denis Walker, who was part of the Black Panther movement in Australia.



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Wesley Enoch: And if anything, her sons represented this kind of narrative we were all trying to get hold of, which was how do we mix the art and the politics? By telling our stories we can make a difference, by telling our stories we can shift the whole thinking within the country. And I think in many ways, you know, we're now whatever 25 odd is, more, oh, we had 25 close to the 30 years–

Criena Gehrke: Keep it going, Wesley, but I'll take 25 years yeah.

Wesley Enoch: (laughs) You'll take 25. Well, we went to university 35 years ago together–

Criena Gehrke: Okay, stop. You can edit that bit out of this podcast. Thank you very much, but yeah, it's been a long time, back to the eldership.

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Wesley Enoch: But this idea of how we were marrying our artistic ambitions with our political ambitions. And I love this idea that if you understand the stories of the people, you can no longer oppress them. That show, *One Woman's Song*, which was my professional acting debut, you know?

And um, and there were three women in playing Auntie Kath. So Deborah Mailman, a young woman called Neokigai Bonner – and if, if the listeners out there can remember that Uncle Neville Bonner was the first Aboriginal person ever, to go into federal politics as a Senator.

And he was for the liberal party at the time. And here is his great granddaughter in our play, you know? Wow. Now, Lydia Miller was also in that play. Lydia Miller, who then ran basically indigenous arts funding for the Australia Council for a good 15 years. And her father helped set up the medical service in, especially in far north Queensland and her mother Pat O'Shane was the first indigenous magistrate, you know, and there's this incredible lineage that goes on there.

And then David Hudson, who's the other Aboriginal person in the company who helped set up Tjapukai a dance company in Kuranda, in the far north of Queensland. So you've got this sense that no, we just weren't actors. We were trying to say, how can we shift the discussion, shift the world?

And now family connections were such that we were always talking about more than just what you were hearing on the stage. We're talking about a big social movement that we were the inheritors of, and that we were trying to get others to come along.



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Criena Gehrke: It's interesting listening to you talk about the politics in storytelling and how those two things went hand in glove, really. Do you think that still applies as we've moved 30 years into the future? Like I'm interested, I feel as though we might've gone off the political boil somehow and as artists and people responsible for programming festivals, precincts, companies, that there is some reservation around making those political statements now.

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Wesley Enoch: Agreed. I think if you look at the progression of the arts from, let's say the 1970s with the beginning of organised arts funding from the Australia council through to the states and things, this big organisation. The political imperative was really to tell our stories, to make sure our accents, our stories were being shown around screens on our stages and this idea of having ownership sovereignty, if you like, over our own storytelling as a nation. As we get to the late eighties into the nineties, that kind of shifts into an economic conversation saying the arts are a wonderful artistic jewel in the country, but it's also an economic engine. This idea that the arts can help revitalise a community, can bring life into it. I mean, all that Richard Florida stuff. How do you make a community attracted to live in? And the arts were part of that.

And I think we then went really extreme into the noughties, as we had this kind of conservative wave that came through from the late nineties into the, to the noughties, to the 2000s where it was saying, okay, the only reason we fund the arts now is because of economic return and we'd lost the argument around intrinsic value of the arts, the importance of the arts and all that we do.

And that we only became an economic cog in a big machine. And I think if anything, COVID has taught us that actually the arts are so important for our mental health, our social health that, you know, how you express yourself is very important.

How going to our screens for entertainment and connection, how reading books and music has played a much stronger role in the last let's say, let's call it two years, than maybe it had done before or our awareness is much stronger. So I think that little journey is, and it's our fault, our fault as artistic leaders and managers that we've let our, let our narrative be taken over by the economy, the economists, and that also our boards have become absolutely driven by board memberships from the captains of industry.

It was interesting, the – Ralph Myers, who was the artistic director of Belvoir Street, I'm going to say almost eight years ago now – he gave a really fiery, passionate speech about the conservative energies of boards that come from corporate makeups that they are, they don't know how to manage the artistic risk and this idea of the investment in social and cultural capital in a society because they're looking constantly for the financial return.



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Wesley Enoch: So they want to spend less on the art because they can't see the value in this investment, this public investment, and that the best art is always a great commercial return. Whereas I think that as again, going back to COVID, we've seen more and more this idea of the importance of a society, the mental health of our community, the physical health of our community is actually more important than the economics.

And I wonder whether we can actually bring that discussion that, that set of rethink of the um, the importance of economics. We can bring that into our future as well. That we don't always have to return back to what we were like before COVID, we can actually take some of these lessons and project ourselves forward.

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Criena Gehrke: Yeah, it's interesting because my concern is that we've lived through COVID and we continue to, and I think that there has been some really interesting shifts in how we are as communities and in how we define culture. You know, exactly as you've said, because we aren't going to the big events and we aren't going to the big blockbuster exhibitions, bands, musicals, whatever that looks like.

So we are engaging in a different way. I guess human nature appears to be to want to go back to what used to happen and the norm pretty quickly. And we're seeing that as venues are opening up, borders are opening up as there's product available to return, particularly to places like HOTA, which is a precinct and fundamentally a venue that does a whole bunch of other stuff in terms of supporting artists and community.

I just wonder what we have actually taken from that. And how do we continue as cultural leaders to create that perfect storm, because you have to keep creating that environment. And I know you've spoken about your experience at Sydney Festival, where some of the most successful in terms of audiences and financial ended up being some of those really fantastic commissioned indigenous stories that were being told and stories very much of the place that they, I would hope are actually more Australian and universal than just the Aboriginal voice in that story.

It is so important that those appear on our stage, but they were actually really commercially viable as well. So is it a misrepresentation that art needs to look a certain way to be economically viable?

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Wesley Enoch: I think there is an incredible comfort in precedent. People look at precedent because they go, that was successful in the past. Therefore it will always be successful. And often you go: actually precedent was um, successful because it represented that time and place and I think that what, I remember when I started at Sydney Festival, I was given the warning. I said, look, they said indigenous shows, actually don't sell very well for us and therefore don't expect them to sell well.



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Wesley Enoch: And I was kind of thinking, what's that really about? Now, what was missing in the discussion with the audiences, with the artists, with the marketing, with, and I kind of went actually, there's a whole audience out there you may not be talking to. Like, don't blame a show if you haven't found its audience yet, because artists by our very nature are osmotically connected to the zeitgeist, to our communities.

We are already thinking about how we're connecting with people and that, especially in indigenous artists find themselves going, oh, I'm now going into a very Western structure and perhaps there's a disconnect in the way we try to talk about the audiences. And I've got the sandwiches, you know, a starved audience is a hungry audience.

And our job is to feed them. So that, that I remember um, uh, *Counting and Cracking*, which was about a migrant experience of coming from Sri Lanka and sold out like that. Like just full of brown people coming to hear their story. And they were saying, people were saying, we don't know where these audiences come from, you know?

Well, that's your deficit, not theirs. We've found a story that connected with them that you didn't realise was possible. Now, what lesson do you have to learn from that? Because you're holding on you the marketing people, the programmers are holding onto a precedent and imagined comfortable zone, when an artist is so much happier finding the edges of things and finding that they can nudge a community forward, nudge a society to think about issues that are slightly outside of their lived experience.

And Sydney Festival, I went from, you know, indigenous shows being told that they were the, the least successful shows, don't worry about needing to make money from them in a slightly patronising way, not too bad, but just going don't bank on it, to in fact, the indigenous shows where the big sell out numbers that got, you know, 11,000, 12,000 – the highest kind of numbers that we could get at the Sydney festival. And I often talk about this idea of the Trojan horse.

When you talk about political messaging, that the best plays work on that universal theme, as you say, that through the very specific lens of the human experience, be that, you know, a migrant family from Sri Lanka and indigenous family here, there are these family threads that we can connect with, and this whole idea of going, what does that mean? That the migrant experience is actually, it's approachable for everyone – regardless of your cultural background cause you understand that kind of stuff.

And the indigenous story. When you start to go, actually I can witness these stories being told in front of me that I've read in the paper or I've seen things kind of laying out and there's this Trojan horse effect. I did a show called *The Sapphires*, which was about a group of Aboriginal women who went to entertain the troops during Vietnam.



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Wesley Enoch: It's based on a true story of the writer's families, mother, and aunts. And *The Sapphires* – which went on to become a film, was this amazing Trojan horse of: Here's the Motown hits of the period, here's the beehives, here's the sequin gowns. Here's the kind of, you know, sassy black women getting out there in the world. But in the heart of it is: What is a colonial war look like? What is an Aboriginal perspective?

What are we talking about in 1968, 1 year after the 67 referendum? And suddenly audiences are getting all of this information, subliminal perhaps, or, you know, under the surface all wrapped up in feather boas. But there's this wonderful sense that they go, oh, I know that story. That story is part of my experience now. And be you know, *Counting and Cracking* - the Sri Lankan story, I've seen that show.

It was successful. It's part of my experience now, it's part of being Australian. And I worry that this COVID experience, we are going to run with open arms, to the comfort of precedent and say, we cannot risk telling a black story. We cannot risk telling a migrant story. We have to embrace our existing audience rather than build a new audience.

And I just, I shudder to think that there's this kind of creeping conservatism that has come from the economics. And we'll go into our kind of programming ideas into the future because we're scared of you know, the, what COVID has done to us, the economics and the social kind of ruptures that have existed in this last couple of years.

So I say the exact opposite. Here at this moment in time is a great sense of going, push forward. All of the major traumatic moments in society – let's say just the last hundred years, post-WW1, post-WW2, there were these massive shifts, huge cultural shifts that existed after WW2.

We see the Edinburgh Festival, the Adelaide Festival, the Perth Festival. We see these festivals rise up because we need to tell stories, we need to connect. And I think there's certain things that we should just keep connecting with and saying, yes, we've gone through a huge disruption, let's use that as a cultural accelerator to imagine what the next iteration of our society can be.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Criena Gehrke: And it's interesting because I've been privileged enough to sit on a few zoom information calls as we all have with urban planners and economists, you know, as people really do start to understand what COVID recovery may look like. And one of the most profound things that I've heard, because it really resonated with me, with this grapple that I have pretty much every day in my real job around:



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Criena Gehrke: How do you make, how do you meet budget? How do you make your visitation targets, and how do you tell the stories that deserve and are crying out to be told, and sometimes there's sense that those things are mutually exclusive and you and I've had these discussions. I mean, raging agreement, I do not for a minute believe that they are mutually exclusive things, but the economist was saying, ignore your community at your peril.

Wesley Enoch: Yes.

Criena Gehrke: Whether it's real estate, whether it's hospitality, tourism, all of those things that contribute very strongly to the Gold Coast economy in particular, but ignore your community at your peril.

And I do sometimes think these whole tussle of what does the old school audience development actually look like, but we've got it sometimes confused. It's actually, what are those stories that should be told? What stories do people want to hear? Who are those audiences? And they're not audiences.

They're just really great humans and communities that want to come and engage in, in this way. So I urge caution for all of us not to go back to that precedent.

[00:21:08]

Wesley Enoch: Yeah, I'm doing some work with a university at the moment, and um, I'm the Indigenous Chair of Creative Industries. And part of my job is to kind of re-imagine the storytelling of a university from an indigenous perspective and promote indigenous perspectives in the way the curriculum works and things. And we've been talking about the impact of COVID and it's highlighted the transactional nature of the services purchased by a student of a university.

And now they realise they can do it all online, will campus life die? And you and I know too, that there's great value in the digital, there's fantastic kind of distribution models. It actually does away with a whole lot of, what I call the disadvantage conversations around ability, you know, disability, location, time, money, and cultural difference.

That those five obstacles to participation disappear a lot in the digital world and is fantastic. But we then lose the analog experience of human beings being together. And the other forms of learning that happened, you know, the social interaction, the um, my, my analysis has been that you, you focus on your cohort and it's a very linear relationship to knowledge when it's in the digital environment.



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Wesley Enoch: I've read one article about management and saying that the work from home digital environment has been fantastic for very hierarchical structures that parcel up work, send it down the line, people complete it and send it back up again. But very little room for innovation, very little room for collaboration and disagreement.

All of it just forms this kind of linear, in and out connecture. And that long-term, that could actually hold us back as an economy, as a society, if we don't find these accidental kind of rubbing up against each other kind of differences along the way, we don't get to practice how we disagree in a congenial and thoughtful manner.

We don't know how we can develop, you know, I love the idea of the cultural ecology being about cultural difference. If you think differently to me, and I think differently to the person, you know, across the table from me, but we are all engaged in identifying this particular idea, pushing it to its edges and from our own cultural points of view.

Aboriginal point of view as well, and a gay man's point of view of things I can say, Well, think about this and think about that. But when we have a kind of a homogenous group of white middle aged men, you know, the pale stale kind of um, group?

And then someone said, yes, it's the pale stale, frail male group, you know, the kind of white male fragility, which is kind of coming forward. But this notion when you have a homogenous view of an idea, that's why you get sideswiped from perspectives you never could imagine. Because you don't have that cultural ecology, you know, pushing an idea to, to its extremes, uh, going back to the university.

So there's this notion of saying actually, how do we make sure that the experience of a university, like the experience of going to the theatre, is actually a very analog kind of sharing of differences. And that we have a respectful debate about things that we differ on? And that we have a kind of, you know, when we come to something that we can all agree is the best idea.

We can celebrate that as a group as well, because it's not just about us sitting in isolation. And what I love about theatre, what I love about what we've been trained to do is always think about a community of people, community of thinkers, a community of engaged environments. And I do fear that we've kind of knocked society and community at the knees sometimes. Knocked them down, and that uh, social media and, digital forms of engagement have taken over, which have been corrupted a lot too by, you know, algorithms that don't question you. Algorithms that don't bring you anything you don't already agree with.

And so there's a sense of how do we challenge that in an analog world constantly, that in the digital world becomes this linear, one way, just always delivering the things that the algorithm thinks you already like, or no.



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Criena Gehrke: So what's the role of art in breaking through that, you know, because we have through COVID been forced into a digital world ourselves to a certain extent in terms of engaging with art and creating art. And I would agree that, that digital world isn't the same as that rich engagement that you get of a shared experience when we're sitting in the theatre together or watching live music, or –

Wesley Enoch: Going to an art gallery, God.

Criena Gehrke: Going to a gallery and really engaging. It's just, it cannot possibly be the same. And that a digital world, particularly around social media, moral indignation appears to be our baseline now, instead of thoughtful provocation and agreeing to disagree and understanding how to have that critical thinking and debate, which is what art does so well, you know?

And, and so I'm really thinking long and hard at the moment that my entire career could be used to change the world. Like I always thought that art could change the world, but you and I both spent rich careers deeply embedded in community. You know, we understand those, that community engagement. We understand the power of storytelling. We understand that these stories must be told for the storyteller's sake, but also the listeners' sake. So we've got all of those tools in our toolkit and the world needs art more than ever and yet we are decimated as a sector because of a whole range of lack of government support, lack of government awareness, closure of venues restrictions. And it's not just Australia, it's timeless and universal at the moment – that sounded like a sermon and a passionate plea for help. But that, you know, so go on Wesley, can you fix that? Tell me what to do.

Wesley Enoch: (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: No, because it's a privilege. My role, is a privilege. So, so what do we do to get there.

Wesley Enoch: Well, can I broaden this out too?

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.

[00:27:47]

Wesley Enoch: Yes, there's the arts, the arts have felt for the last, let's say 20 years, a little under attack – maybe longer actually, but let's say the last 20 years under attack, under scrutiny, but also so has journalism and so has science and so have universities. All of them are about questioning the status quo and about imagining a future, about creating a vocabulary for the future, about saying, Okay, we are here now, but how do we find a different way?



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Wesley Enoch: How do we imagine something different? And like the arts are done through a kind of intuitive connection to community and science is done by this kind of well, logic and scientific theory to kind of create things, to push things forward. And universities are, have become not about just thinking, like the grace of thought, but has become this how do I train you to the next job that you need to do it? And I don't know about you, but the stuff we learned at university – this was a while ago now, 35 years. The things we learned at university 35 years ago, to be honest –

Criena Gehrke: Stop saying 35 years! (laughs)

Wesley Enoch: It is, it is, it is... 35 years ago. But content I think is just literally the fashion of the day.

And what universities have been about is about instilling a sense of curiosity to learn, and to grow and to go further and I worry that we, universities have become more and more this kind of transactional thing that I said before about; I learned the skills, I go out and I get a job. And I think universities should be about this as I said, the grace of thought, the grace of learning. And journalism has become more and more about entertainment.

How do I keep you on the hook for as long as possible? How do I get clickbait kind of journalism that gets things going, how do I do that out of journalism, rather than going: I have a moral authority and importance to make sure that the public are getting the best stories, the best investigations of an idea, getting multiple perspectives of things so that we can, uh, make up our own mind as readers or watchers through journalism or listeners. So, so for me, I think all of those areas have been under attack for the last 20 years and more so in the last, let's say 5 to 10 years, where there are clear policies being made or neglected in those particular areas.

There's a whole range of attacks of those areas because they make us feel uncomfortable. And when you talked about moral outrage being the status quo on especially social media, it's, we haven't actually worked out how if something makes me feel uncomfortable at the moment, if I feel discomfort by what you say, what you're saying is wrong, instead of actually going, oh, I feel discomfort.

Why am I feeling uncomfortable? What is it about what Criena has said that turned me into this kind of quivering mess? Do I get defensive about it and say, no, you're wrong. Shut up. You have to stop. Or do I go, oh, what does that say about me? What does it say about you? What does it say about society and how do we engage in that kind of critical thinking?



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Criena Gehrke: Just down a different path for a moment. I want to return to a discussion about programming and provocation that's come to me in recent weeks. So HOTA has just opened our new gallery. We have a significant city collection of over four and a half thousand works and actually – and I'm going to say this, surprisingly for the Gold Coast, it does include quite a number of significant indigenous works. It's quite a strong collection.

We've decided to adopt the curatorial approach. And this, I think is around those universal stories, but also what is indigenous storytelling now. But we don't have an indigenous gallery, so it is not, Come to HOTA and see the Aboriginal artwork, it's actually scattered throughout the exhibitions as significant moments of important storytelling.

So, Tony Albert, who's a beautiful contemporary indigenous artist here in Australia, Gordon Hookey, who's very political and controversial and provocative – those works are hung alongside the Michael Zavros work. You know, they're not put aside as here is our indigenous storytelling and history.

And I guess I'm just interested in that, because that's part of that evolution or have I got it really wrong?

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Wesley Enoch: Oh, look, I think, well I think there's a huge spectrum of experiences. I know having uh, as an indigenous storyteller, as a theatre maker, I make a show differently in an indigenous or indigenous space, or a indigenous controlled space, as opposed to if I'm working in a Western space. Now, I would argue that I should, through my skills and experiences and perspectives, I should have mobility between the different environments in which I make work, but there is a very different experience with having an indigenous environment to make of the work. You do things differently. I mean, it there's less translation. I mean, as a maker, the collaboration is different.

There's, you're not having to justify yourself or explain yourself about why you want to do this or do that. And then, you know, then working in a Western mode, you just go, okay, I just have to do slightly more work to make sure everyone understands. And you know, there could be a lovely paternal kind of, oh yeah, we'll do whatever you want Wesley.

But no, no, no. I want you to understand why I want to do this rather than just, you agree. So there's a lot of kind of work there. What I think is, uh, there's, uh, there's a maturation of our abilities now to see context. You know, to see a work in different contexts. So I think uh, Tony Albert work could hang alongside desert painting of the Yuendumu Doors, because it's about household items kind of lifted into the realm of art, but also he could be alongside Gold Coast kitsch, you know?



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Wesley Enoch: And so his work can actually shift from one form to another very easily, depending on how you want to read the work. And I think your perspective on the curatorial kind of approach, when you think about what Mona's has been doing, or Nick Mitzevich has been doing now at the National Gallery of Australia. Where you're saying, actually this context is the most important vital thing; that you can have something that's hundreds of years old and something that's 5 days old sitting beside each other.

Cause they get to talk with each other. And that the, I heard this saying, which is, you know, two people can see 10 pieces of theatre and three they'll love, and three they'll hate. And four they think are in the middle. And then we'll agree on which is which, and actually it's, it's in the conversation about what you loved, what you hated, what you thought was okay, what you thought was amazing, what you thought was rubbish, who you loved, or who you didn't love on stage. That conversation is what art is about. It's not really about collecting and holding on to, and, you know, digging it in and just saying, this is static, but it's about the conversation. And when we talked earlier about what the role of art is, that art is about engaging that debate.

You know, the, the invitation to engage and have a really vital conversation, which is about yourself really, not about the art. The arts' just this wonderful mirror that reflects all of your fears and your trepidation, and also reinforces who you are.

And I think that debate is what we all as artist should be encouraging. I remember at Sydney Festival people come up and say, I hated that play. I hated it. And I go, oh, tell me why, I can't wait! And they said, and I said, oh, that one wasn't for you. What did you hate about it? And they would tell me about why they were infuriated or hated it, or what kind of stuff.

And I loved that. In many ways when people say, they're very articulate about the things they don't like, and almost the exact opposite is also really interesting when they say I loved it.

I loved it. It was amazing. It was so fantastic. And I go, that's useless to me. Tell me why you love it. You know, you have to be equally engaged in the love-hate conversation. It's the mediocre response that like, don't know what to do with, you know, we feel like meh, whatever. The extremes are really valuable.

And so, I mean, the challenge of a place like HOTA is to go, how do you not just show the work? How do you make sure that there's always an invitation for debate, for discussion. Maybe that's, you know, you come and see a film or you come and see a theatre piece or go to the gallery, and then on the way home in the car, you talk about it.

How do you make sure that that's happening? And we're not in control of that half the time you kind of wanted.



[00:37:09]

Criena Gehrke: Although it comes back to what does success mean in an arts and cultural precinct, or how do you measure that success? You know, and as we've said earlier in the conversation, so much focus has been on economic benefit and return, commercial success, tickets sales, visitation, and, you know, actually Global Cultural Districts Network has been doing a lot of work around this metrics and how you measure impact and, success in broad inverted commerce for these cultural precincts.

And it's fascinating because we so often lose sight of what I think is really key and is the way that I measure my own success in this role, which is, how did that make you feel?

[00:37:58]

Wesley Enoch: Agreed. I mean, what I think is one of the corrupting influences that's going on, especially in festivals, is when we talk about visitation, we've moved from bums on seats to heads and beds. You know, this idea of interstate or international visitation is somehow more valuable than your own community.

And, you know, great. I love that people might travel to a venue or a festival or an artistic event because it's a great attractor, but it's almost shifting now, we're turning into kind of tourism icons rather than going, no we, we are here for our community first and then people come and visit our community.

And I imagine, you know, HOTA on the Gold Coast by its very nature, has a huge kind of transitory audience of people, holiday makers, and people coming in. This balancing between, you know, do you play to them or do you play to your community? Or how can you play to both? I think we can actually.

[00:38:56]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah. And I think that there are certain things that precincts, festivals, organisations can do to, hold themselves accountable to their very vision and mission and one needs to state it.

Wesley Enoch: Agreed.

Criena Gehrke: Our time together is nearly up, Wesley, but I, I guess I've got one big question to ask. What do you wish for our future?

[00:39:18]

Wesley Enoch: Now, this is interesting. Um, I've shifted a little, you know, my father died about six years ago. This is my Aboriginal side of the family and he died at 65. And this whole idea of it shifted my mindset a little bit from uh, I'm now in my fifties and going, actually, is it my role to control the future or is it my role to actually help the next generation to imagine the future?



[00:39:46]

Wesley Enoch: And you know, when I was, when we were at university, I used to rail against the Queensland Theatre Company, thinking it was conservative and stuck in the mud and needed to change. And then 20 years later or whatever it was, I was running it going, actually now I'm the conservative stuck in the mud. And these younger generations are finding a vibrant way of imagining the future and railing against me. I love it.

And so this sense of, I don't think it's my job to imagine the future. My job is to actually help these next generations come up. Let's say in the Aboriginal community, there are more people, the majority of our population is under 30. There are more Aboriginal people under 30 than there are over 30.

And why is that? Because Aboriginal babies are living longer, you know, um, infant mortality rates have dropped. There's a whole kind of sense of the confidence that comes from being able to feed and house your children, that you have children and all those kinds of things.

So there's a confidence coming up in this next younger generation. And, as I turn into this gray head fat old man, (laughs) I start to go, actually my time is, if not coming to a close, I need to focus not by what I'm pushing forward in the future, but to go, actually, how have I made the path stronger, better for the next to turn up?

So I look to be honest, I hope that they can create a world, which is, you know, dealing with climate change, that they are dealing with different social issues about diversity. Oh, they're already so much more articulate than I was growing up about cultural differences and about genders and sexualities and about the engagement in the digital world and things like that.

So I actually want to place myself in a service role, to them. Rather than think that it's my job to imagine what the future needs. I'm just going, what do you need? What does this next generation need? And I'm willing to help them get there, on that, on that moped, most probably, as they go fast, want to get them on that moped so they can go as fast and as far as they need to.

[00:41:59]

Criena Gehrke: I can see why your community is beginning to refer to you as Uncle Wesley. They were truly final words of wisdom. May the future be bright for those younger generations and I agree, it's our responsibility to support them to be the wonderful young people that they are and the future leaders of this fine country. Wesley, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you as always.

Listeners, if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find external references and other resources linked to this episode and to Wesley Enoch's work.



[00:42:38]

Criena Gehrke: But first, stick around for a conversation between myself and the glorious Stephanie Fortunato, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:42:47]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:42:59]

Criena Gehrke: Stephanie, hello!

[00:43:01]

Stephanie Fortunato: Hello Criena, how are you?

Criena Gehrke: I am so well. How are things on your side of the world?

Stephanie Fortunato: I was just getting little chilly around here. It's quite lovely. All the trees are gold and red and quite glorious actually.

Criena Gehrke: So what did you think about Wesley? Isn't he just one of the most amazing human beings I've ever had the privilege to know?

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, what a wonderful conversation that you had, you know, I just so enjoyed the back and forth between the two of you and he's such a great storyteller. And you could see, you know, you two clearly known each other for a long time. And that came through in the conversation because you actually were able to show the way your learnings, the way your experiences had transformed your relationship and your understanding of one another's work over time. I so loved the conversation.

[00:43:54]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, he has been one of those huge influences as well as a friend and colleague on my life. And I was reflecting when I listened back to our conversation, that we really did start as starry-eyed teenagers thirty-five years ago, um, and where we are now. But just how long it takes to create change in the world.

You know, that when I think about Wesley's leadership and being able to change the way that quite rightly first nations and indigenous people, our positions, which sounds like a terrible thing to say. But you know, like when we, when he started his work 35 years ago, that was ground breaking – that first show, and just how much things have changed in 35 years.

And yet how little has changed.



[00:44:50]

Stephanie Fortunato: It's so incremental. I mean, that was one of my top takeaways and perhaps the most important thing I think that came out of the conversation, was how important it is for all of us living in places where colonialism has touched to really be engaging in conversation about indigenous rights, about indigenous culture and lifeways, you know, and really making ourselves accountable to coming back to this conversation at the centre of the places that we live, time and time again, right? It's not enough to say, Oh, that was a great show, you know, and then sort of check that box. It's really an ongoing dialogue of thinking, you know, about what is culture, you know, where we live.

[00:45:35]

Criena Gehrke: The centre of thinking and the driving force of leadership too, is what I took from that conversation and it was interesting that in the week following, because we record these podcasts, then have time to think about them and then we come back together to reflect – there you go listeners, did you really think Stephanie was just on the line, coming back to me immediately?

But in that ensuing week, I actually had a meeting with our indigenous Elders group that advises us at HOTA. And talking about the fact that so many opportunities that are provided to indigenous cultural workers are entry-level, like there's this misperception that it's about increased education mentorship.

And actually what's required is a bold statement that it's about leadership. You know, it's not always about pathways to leadership and how do we support that level of indigenous leadership in our own organisations. And I think Wesley's experience at Sydney Festival was a really outstanding moment of leadership because what he did was not program First Nations work, he's actually, you know, a proud indigenous leader who just by the very nature of his storytelling programme that work. Does that make sense?

[00:47:08]

Stephanie Fortunato: Mm. Well it's, I mean, what he was talking about, I think in the ways in which it's different for him to work within a cultural institution that is by and for indigenous people –

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: And being within other kinds of cultural institutions. I thought that is, you know, that's kind of what I hear in what you're saying in terms of his leadership, right? Like it's really important to have places where he doesn't have to worry about interpreting or translating his own storytelling for an audience that is looking at him as "other".



[00:47:44]

Stephanie Fortunato: Um, and so, I think as, leaders of cultural institutions, it is though about making sure that we are uh, that there's support for that work to both standalone and to, to be part of a wider cultural context, right. Funding and resources and access to space and all of the things that are required for artists to succeed.

[00:48:06]

Criena Gehrke: It was interesting because Wesley and I have worked together for so long and known each other for so long. I felt like he gave me a provocation in a kind way, when I was asking about HOTA's approach to programming, because particularly in the gallery, we have had a very integrated approach as I said, during that conversation.

And his reflection, was saying the same thing that when he makes or is presenting work in a Western context, he understands that context and he leans into it. Whereas when he's making work with indigenous cast, indigenous storytelling, it's a different sort of experience for him because he doesn't have to explain and because there's a cultural understanding.

And I really have taken that away and I'm thinking long and hard about what that means in terms of our programming. And I think for us, it means that there will be both of those different environments in which to create and present work; there is the Western context of the big gallery, but there's also something else that we could take away from that conversation.

And then when I said, what does the future look like? How do you imagine it? That was another little provocation of, Well, darling, we are 35 years down the track. So what is our responsibility to the future story that we are just a small part of?

[00:49:42]

Stephanie Fortunato: I feel like we're so often, in this role uh, sort of at the portal, right, as the gatekeeper, both, I mean, I think for both of us representing cultural institutions that are also supported by government, right? We are always in that role, I find, of being educators and translators.

And, but also as people ourselves, we have to think about the emerging arts administrators that are coming up and making sure that they have their own place, right? (laughs)

[00:50:11]

Criena Gehrke: How do we get out of our own way sometimes? You know? How do we both clear the path? Because you do get to a certain level of seniority where I protect a whole bunch of stuff that's sitting behind so that it clears the way for great work to be created.



[00:50:28]

Criena Gehrke: But also I'm acutely aware that I at times am a gatekeeper and so how do I get out of everyone's way to support that next generation and particularly being quite a privileged white woman – and that's not to say that women in leadership don't have certain challenges, but being quite a privileged white woman, how, what is my role and responsibility in getting out of the way, but also enabling, you know. It's still tricky, which goes back to we've still got a long, long way to go, but thank God for people like Wesley Enoch.

[00:51:08]

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Yeah. I mean like, this is the work, right. And I am grateful that people like Wesley are gracious enough to have these conversations to help push us, right? And to do a better job and to encourage others to do so as well. You know, I wanted to reflect on something else that you guys spoke about which I think is sort of at the, in some ways it's the cornerstone I think, of Western cultural institutions in some ways, it's thinking about the economic impact of which I feel like you and I have talked about so much over time, you know.

[00:51:41]

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) It's like, it's like, I feel like the recurring theme of our conversations are economic impact and values-based approaches to cultural institutions. It's like the formula's seeming really simple in our conversations and it's so complex.

[00:51:56]

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, my god. I knew, I feel like that's going to be always unpacking it because I think we are caught in what we're needing to have the numbers, right, the economic impact, you know, we need to make sure that we're going to earn revenue, all of those things and yeah, it's not the most fulfilling thing about the work, but, and here, we're just about to start, we're in the beginning of a conversation about our next economic impact study. And so again, you know, internally we're having these conversations about quantitative, qualitative, all of, all of the measures that we think about. But you know, we do really need to think about other ways to measure impact.

I mean, I think that's just the bottom line here. And I do think that there are other ways to think about change over time and institutions have been doing a good job, like ArtPlace and looking at the metric against, you know, community development and community planning and others. But I think for you and I, again, these gatekeepers we need to assure officials that they can invest in the arts and you can invest in non-Western art. You can invest in you know, sort of a range of artistic practices and, and it's a good investment. Um, and yet we also need to think about how we can make sure that the artists can take the risks that they need to take to produce great work. Because I think as Wesley was talking about, it's that great work that speaks for itself in terms of the impact. And so that's why art and storytelling are really the best demonstration of the value of the arts, right.



[00:53:31]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, and the fact that the work that he did at Sydney Festival was so impactful in so many ways, like leading a political conversation, um, economically viable, even though it was different stories to what people were used to hearing, you know, and that all of those things aren't mutually exclusive, that you can deliver outstanding results that take a whole bunch of required boxes through great storytelling and a commitment to that storytelling.

I will be interested, and feel free to send us comments back around how some of the marketing folk might feel about a few of the things that he said around you know, we're not told that there's no audience for this particular product and it's like, that's a you issue, not a me issue. It's that we just haven't found the community.

And I know that is another one of those things that at a future podcast, we probably need to unpack around the constant tussle between the creative, the administration and then the marketing team who really are the ones that often do great work, getting the word out there to those communities. And I think that there's a future conversation in that as well.

Stephanie Fortunato: It's like a healthy tension to explore there.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) We love it, healthy tension. It really was an absolutely fabulous conversation. And Stephanie, as always, I thoroughly enjoyed the wrap-up that we do. You always bring such insights and provocations to this podcast.

Stephanie Fortunato: Ah, thank you, Criena. It's always a pleasure to speak with you as well.

Criena Gehrke: Hey, take care, talk soon!

Stephanie Fortunato: That sounds good.

[00:55:20]

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. And if you haven't already done so, tell your friends, please subscribe to our feed and write 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.

[00:55:48]

THEME MUSIC

