

IT'S NOT ME IT'S YOU

Handing over my process to nine-year olds and collaborating with the wider community.

I have been lucky enough to tour the world for the past 10 years, doing what I love with my best mates. The Suitcase Royale started touring our theatre works internationally 3 months after we finished university and has been one of the most successful small-medium scale theatre companies in Australia. My dream has always been “To be an artist and tour the world.”

But is that selfish?

What started to truly interest me moving forward as an artist, were some key questions: How can I make art that is accessible to people who aren't the IN crowd? What if I lost all ego in performance-making? What if a creative process could be just as valuable to the community as to the artist? And what can I do to further my impact in the wider global community – still touring the world as an artist, but fertilizing it rather than blazing a trail as I go?

Fade to black

Spotlight shines on Lachlan, age 9.

In 2012 I was asked by St. Martins Youth Theatre in Melbourne to co-devise a work with them in collaboration with the Victorian College of the Deaf. I had never worked with kids before, especially kids of different hearing abilities. What followed was a truly new and rewarding experience of making work and one that would shape the next chapter of my creative career.

Lachlan was a real brat! A bugger. He would play up and he wouldn't sign Auslan (Australian sign language) for us. He was obsessed with zombies and he wore light up sneakers that meant when we designed beautiful lighting states for the show, he would make a point of striding through them and crossing the stage with these intense red blinking lights that shone into the audiences eyes.

On the last day of the process, I found out Lachlan was a great signer – in fact he was fluent in Auslan and just didn't tell anyone. He became my cult hero: a rebel without a cause. As the process came to an end, I had a realisation that I had been making a theatre show and placing it *on* these kids. It was beautiful and fun, but very much an adult-led arts project in which the adults had the final say on the piece of art that was made.

On our last afternoon together I asked Lachlan if he were to make a show, what would it be? He drew me a picture titled *BLOOD!! DEATH!!* “The blood death show” he signed, and straight away I felt I had to see this show. And to see this artwork I would have to make it in collaboration with 9-11 year olds.

All of a sudden I felt like Liam Neeson answering the call in the movie, *Taken*:

I don't know who you are. I don't know what you want. If you are looking for ransom, I can tell you I don't have money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills; skills I have acquired over a very long career...

Bryan Mills (as played by Liam Neeson)

The BLOOD!! DEATH!! SHOW!

Since 2013 I have been touring the world with The BLOOD!! DEATH!! SHOW! It takes the form of a massive haunted house I build with 9-11 year olds for an adult audience. I house and present their stories of the community around them, exploring urban myths and suburban legends. It's crazy and wild, exhausting and fascinating.

"I believe that a successful collaboration is where your collaborator gets more from it than you do."

Tanuja Amarasuriya: Sleepdogs/Theatre Bristol (DIY Book 1)

The creative development of the work almost becomes the work itself. It offers an opportunity for young people to be actively creative and have genuine input in the creation of the show. I work with councils, schools, arts centres and festivals to identify a group that have little, if any, relationship with the arts.

It is my hope to provide a *true* exchange of ideas, viewing the kids as young artists and collaborators. Not only will they contribute to the creation of a cutting-edge artwork but I also enable them to explore their own creativity through the design of the piece, writing of the material and the creation of the soundtrack. It is their artwork.

What really surprises me are the teacher's comments. They are always astonished (and me too if I'm honest,) at how hard the children work, at their focus and commitment to hand-building a world. This project is entirely made out of recycled materials. They work tirelessly and animatedly, through their lunch break even, on building, planning and constructing the haunted house. I am there every step of the way: facilitating, building and working through my lunch break too.

I believe DIY skills are being lost, and on one level, this project allows for a transference of skills and attitudes that I have gained through my years of touring and creating. The results of these processes are anarchic, labyrinthine, handmade 'haunted houses' that adults are invited to explore, listen and respond to.

Art is about conversation and in the performance world this can be, at times, an introverted conversation. I feel that the real challenge for me in becoming a better artist is to be extroverted in my process and my conversation with my chosen art form. I find myself no longer interested in preaching to the converted, but working in the community to create beautiful and finely honed arts experiences.

This transference, this sharing of stories and ideas, with different age groups and members of the community has started to shape the next chapter of my art creation.

The passing on of stories, the passing on of DIY skills has turned the spotlight on the audience showcasing THEIR creations and THEIR stories, allowing me in some way to start to shape and better the world around me. Because art is for all and if everyone isn't in the room, theatre, arts centre or festival, we should at least invite them in and give them the opportunity to be a part of this wonderful world as we move forward, learning from each other and creating together.

"I like working with JOF because it lets us be who we want to be. I like making art and building the haunted house, he gets out of the way."

Liam* age 9 (St Johns Upper Holloway, London)

****This time not Mr. Neeson.***