



Podcast Transcript

Creative Responders: In Conversation with John Lane

March 2020

Scotia Monkivitch: Hello and welcome to Creative Responders in Conversation. I'm Scotia Monkivitch and I'm speaking to you from Jagera and Turrbal Country, Brisbane.

The world has changed significantly since I last spoke to you in October 2019. Over the Australian summer, we experienced the worst bushfire season on record and many of our communities are undertaking the long process of recovery. And now, as I record this in March, the world is adjusting to the new reality of facing a global pandemic with the spread of Covid-19, whose impact we don't yet fully understand, but whose recovery we will all be undertaking.

Our arts communities are hurting - along with many other sectors. And I know this is an uncertain time for many. It's important for us to find new ways to connect until things stabilise. And I'm really pleased to reconnect with you here for now for our new monthly series, Creative Responders in Conversation.

Each episode will feature an in-depth conversation between me and one guest. We'll be checking in with artists, emergency management experts, creative leaders and members of impacted communities as they prepare, respond and recover from disaster.

We're also working on bringing you news stories for the second season of our documentary series, which will be out later in the year. But in the meantime, we wanted to keep this connection with our audience to give you the opportunity to hear from some of the people on the frontlines of the arts and emergency sector.

For our first chat of 2020, I caught up with John Lane. John is the statewide artistic coordinator for the Festival of Healthy Living. John and I sat down together on March 17th. We were set to deliver an event in Melbourne at the Royal Children's Hospital to celebrate creative recovery and mark the 21st anniversary of the Festival for Healthy Living. We ended up moving online due to concerns around coronavirus at that time, and the change in format also gave us an opportunity to sit down and have this conversation where we discussed John's work that sits in a really interesting intersection of education, health, young people and the arts. So I hope you enjoy this conversation with creative responder John Lane.

Scotia: Welcome, John.

John: Thank you, Scotia. It's a pleasure.

Scotia: So, John, can you start off by telling us a little bit about who you are and what you do?

John: Well, my name's John Lane and I am the so-called Statewide Festival for Healthy Living artistic co-ordinator. And the Festival for Healthy Living is a program initiated by the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, specifically a children's hospital mental health service. And that's what I do. I'm on a point eight salary position and I've actually been in that position since October 2004, and that was after four years of freelancing as a part time co-ordinator.

Scotia: So what led you to this work? What was your interest in getting caught up in the Festival of Healthy Living, Festival FOR healthy living?

John: For Healthy Living, yes. Subtle, but important difference. Well, look, my pat answer is that a very long time ago, over 40 years ago, I actually studied medicine for three years. I dropped out because I spent all my time doing student theatre and not nearly enough time studying and it finally caught up with me. They offered me a chance to repeat some subjects. I said, no, I've just got this theatre bug I have to go and do that.

So I took a year off and that's when I got offered a job in Queensland with a popular theatre troupe and started working professionally in theatre straight away after leaving uni,

which was extremely fortunate that I had a full time job with an ensemble. And that actually became a passion of mine to work in community, because I learnt that from working with a popular theatre troupe in in Brisbane and touring all over the place, that the work we were doing was taking theatre *to* the community, but also working *with* community to stage participatory events that were about enhancing empowerment of progressive community groups. And I kind of got that bug very early on. And I think in some way it was still the sort of the kind of do-gooder doctor in me that wanted my work to still be socially useful and so I've done all sorts of things, all sorts of theatre in the community over about 20 years, mostly working full time with three different community theatre companies, but then starting to get into producing events that were somehow bringing people together so that they would celebrate diversity and celebrate the harmony of a community coming together and that being a healthy thing for a community. And in the course of doing that I was doing all sorts of freelance stuff and it was suggested to me that I might like to try out for this job with the Children's Hospital of being the coordinator of a team of artists working in schools. And I did that in 2000 and so for four years I did that as a kind of freelance thing amongst all the other stuff I was doing.

And then I got offered actually a full time opportunity with my local council to be their festival events coordinator and the manager of community development at the children's hospital decided he'd better come up with a full time offer to counter that. And so that's when the salaried position was created and I decided to go with the children's hospital job.

Scotia: Fantastic. So they really saw the investment of your work.

So I met you first, John, when I started to work in Queensland after 2010/11 floods and I found out about your cartwheels project that you were doing as a project post the 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria. Can you tell us a bit about that project?

John: Well, this is one of the things about working with the children's hospital, even though I don't work *in* the hospital at all and nearly 99 or more per cent of the people who work the children's hospital do a completely different job to me. But even so, because I work for the children's hospital, it came to my attention that they were looking for all sorts of interventions or post-ventions I suppose they're called to help with recovery post Black Saturday bushfires and so we got, you know, government people saying, what can you do to help? They must have been somewhat aware of our program because we did have

some funding from Department of Health and Department of Education at that time and the biggest kind of health and community agency in the cathedral ranges was Berry Street, and they ended up being the major host organisation that invited us to come in and with them create a festival for healthy living type project, but one with some very unique features that made it quite different from anything we'd done before. So that included forgetting about a usual structure which was we'll create a mini cluster of schools with us, a secondary school, a number of feeder primary schools that will end up after three or six months of intensive weekly workshops putting on a combined show.

So in the post-Black Saturday environment, we did a fairly comprehensive scoping study which indicated that people were in no way ready to commit to creating a steering committee - they already had enough to do - or to committing to putting on a major show in six or 12 months time. So instead we worked town by town, locality by locality, making sure that what we were doing was appropriate to what those people in that school or that little community most needed and what was most appropriate to each area. We end up working in seven different towns, including Alexandra is the main town, but lots of little communities in the Cathedral Ranges. And it was quite different what we did in each place.

And then at the end of the second year, the school, the Alexandra Secondary College, did host a combined festival. So it took two and a half years to get to that point rather than one year.

And this was about another unique feature, not so much unique but much more pronounced, was the absolute vital necessity of bringing in mental health workers to work alongside the artist.

Scotia: I think what I really liked about that as a sort of structure, which I hadn't seen before when I was first starting to research in that area, was the multiplicity of partners that you brought in and particularly that triage between education, health and artists and how you created a capacity to really have collegial support, but also collegial education and collegial training.

John: Yeah. Well fortunately at the same time we were engaged in an artist training program funded by Australia Council. Those were the days we had a three year funding

grant to do a really good job of training artists right across Victoria, probably nearly 100 artists were involved in that training program.

So we were more advanced than we ever had been about our processes for getting that multi-disciplinary approach to working in a very collaborative way so that people who were used to different sorts of language could use their different language but we had to learn each other's language, you know, like mental health people might talk about 'an intervention' and all sorts of you know, they might talk about 'trauma informed practice' - and artists haven't got a clue what they're talking about. The teachers might be talking about in the language of their 'curriculum objectives' and having to fit into 'social emotional learning goals'. Artists would have a completely different set of language. And by having shared, and regular shared occasions for professional development and debriefing, we actually were able to get to common ground in that in those three areas coming together. And then there's the fourth area which is actually community development workers. So that our work wasn't only about working with young people and children in schools, it was about creating events for the whole community to benefit from. And that was very important, really important for the morale of communities had been so utterly devastated by bushfires.

Scotia: So we often hear the language around resilience at the moment being a big word. How would you interpret that and how do you see your work being part of this notion of resilience building for our communities?

John: Well, I think resilience has been a key word for us for a couple of decades. And there are several levels of that.

One is on an individual level, a young person or any person of any age discovering something they can do that's creative means they can express themselves in a creative and pleasing way. And that has two effects. One, that they have a sense of agency that their voice can be heard, but also it's can be a form of stress relief for people. And thirdly, knowing that you're good at something, there's a little tune that I sang this morning...

[singing] everybody's good at something. All you gotta do is practise try in something new is work you go to do. Don't give up, give it a go, whatever you do.

And that's true. Everybody's good at something. And you start to hear kids saying that to each other. Oh, I'm good at stilt walking or oh, I wrote a song today. You know, people get a lift out of making some artwork or sculpture or being able to dance or in some way express themselves in a way that they didn't know they could do. And being encouraged to do that means that people have something to fall back on when they they are going through a dip. So their resilience, they can say they can be reminded hopefully of that fact that "oh yeah, but I can still do that" and I might do some of that to calm myself or to make myself feel better. So that's an individual level of resilience.

Then community resilience happens at all different levels, the level of a school community, for example, the fact that people have come together with other people in their community, like visiting artists who are from their community they've connected with and some local or reasonably local health professionals who come in to kind of support everybody because everybody's been through a traumatic experience means that the people feel like they have a greater web of a safety net being created for them. People they can talk to, people they can ask for advice, people they can fall back on. And if you're enhancing connections, it creates a sense of community resilience and putting on a show, even if it's a tiny little thing, it might just be a small art exhibition that some way the kids have done something, parents and other family members and other people in the community come along and are proud of their kids, that in itself builds people's spirit and they feel like "yep, we're gonna be okay. We'll get through this." Everybody's good at something.

Scotia: And so it kind of answered it in a way, but often, well, the key objective of the creative recovery network is to build and make a bridge, I suppose, for arts into disaster management and vice versa. So if if we were looking at that, what do you think are the key skills that we bring in to this web of different organisations, different service bodies etc, what do you think that we bring in that is kind of more unique to be able to have the impact that we believe that we do?

John: Well, I think as artists, we're nothing if not flexible, flexible in an imaginative intellectual sense, you know, we kind of think around problems, thinking laterally about things in a different imagine different ways of viewing a problem and re creating representing that problem with potentially positive solutions. So I think artists are, not always, but can be encouraged to be coached and trained and and become more experienced at taking a very solution focussed view to life and life's ups and downs. And

they can learn from health professionals as well about, you know, a positive approach to developing and looking after your own mental health. And for that not to be a boogey word “mental health” but for it to actually be a positive thing, you can be mentally healthy. So I think artists have got that by nature, have got the possibility to look flexibly at things from different ways.

And also, I just think that I'll kind of echo what people say about artists coming into the schools, that they are a breath of fresh air, that they are able to bring a sense of inspiration, of joy, of creativity, of imagination, of fun or even just quirkiness or, you know, eccentricity.

Even the way that artists are dressed might be different from, you know, schoolteachers normally. And that is very refreshing. That's what I'm told by the schools who've got the artist coming in. Look, there are probably a whole lot of other things. You know, you talk about transferable skills. And I know that the people for some time now in business have been open about the fact they like to employ people who have been involved in some kind of artistic expression, not necessarily professionally, because they have these kind of open minded approaches and flexible, lateral thinking and so on.

The other thing that I think artists well it depends, different art forms bring different things, you know. So some visual arts, for example, is very soothing, very calming. And I love walking into a classroom where all the kids are drawing or painting or doing some textiles. And it's so quiet and calm because everybody's absorbed in the process.

When I run something in a classroom, it's never like that. I really have to sort of steel myself, too, because because I'm a performing artist essentially, although I make giant sculptural puppets and then take them out and perform with those.

But I'm really into music drama and physical performance, circus and other things. And I like the energy and I love to have everybody talking at the same time and we're singing and shouting together. But that is sometimes inappropriate. Some kids, kids on the spectrum, for example, or other people who are really shell-shocked for whatever reason, you need to be very calm. So artists can learn from each other. I also think artists learn from teachers like there's some excellent teachers. The teacher at Buxton Primary School, we're talking about cathedral ranges, Lyn Pope was so good at talking so quietly and the

kids having to strain to listen. It is a great technique and I've employed that myself sometimes just talking quietly in a way that makes them really curious. It's like when you do mime, suddenly everyone goes quiet in the audience. So ah, I think artists, educational and health people all have different things to bring that a lot of people, teachers and health professionals say, oh, I haven't got a creative bone in my body. We know that's rubbish, that everybody has some kind of creative possibilities, but they don't feel confident about setting up creative processes. So people who are confident because they do it all the time are a great thing to bring in. And it's great for kids learning in every there's plenty of research shows that involvement in the arts in a very participatory way increases your educational outcomes, which in turn increases usually your life outcomes.

Scotia: Well, we're just going into this very experiential time with Covid-19 on top of the container of the bushfires from over the Christmas season. What would be some ways that you would suggest that people might start to think about bringing creativity into their lives over this period of slowly shutting down or enacting isolation?

John: Yeah, well, it's it's a tricky one, because a lot of our focus has been on the brilliant thing about the arts, bringing people together to celebrate together. You know, creating events are a whole lot of people come together and get to see who else is in their community and what they're doing. So that's not going to be possible for the next couple of months, maybe longer. So we are going to have to be flexible and get creative with the use of the modern technologies of zoom conference and teleconferencing and so on. And I just think that that is a possibility for us to explore new technologies and new media. I mean, we've been over the last few years, every time we're working in schools or with young people making little movies or doing video or doing kind of fancy PowerPoint, even like online content has to be part of it because it's so popular and it's so relevant to the modern world. So it's not that's not a new thing, but I think it might be might sort of have to be employed more than ever.

I think in some ways perhaps for the next couple of months for me, because as of yesterday, I discovered that we can't run workshops in schools anymore. Government Department of Education have said no more incursions. So. Okay. Immediately. I know that for the next couple of months, and who knows how long after that, we're not going to be doing our seven to 10 to 12 workshops per week in schools. So it means we can do a better job of setting up the next wave of projects which are due to start in three and a half

months time. So I think it does offer an opportunity and also because there will be a government response which allows for funding. It does offer some opportunities to set up things perhaps in a more organised and better resourced way than would have been otherwise. So the current pain may lead to future gain

Scotia: So, through some sort of reflective thinking?

John: Yeah.

Scotia: Well, John, I look forward to planning with you and to playing with you in the next few months and in the next few years, certainly within the recovery in Victoria. So thanks so much for talking with us.

John: A great pleasure Scotia. I also look forward to working with you and to keeping in touch with the stuff that's happening all over Australia because there's a growing community of people doing this creative recovery work. And that's very encouraging, thanks to you.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for this first episode of our new conversation series. Many thanks to John for taking time to speak with me and sharing his insights. I hope you can join us for our next episode where I speak with Jeremy Smith, a beloved figure on the Australian art scene, who I spoke with as he was on the brink of exiting his tenure with the Australia Council, where he's been working as Arts Practice Director for Community, Arts and Cultural Development, Emerging and Experimental Arts.

In the meantime, if you haven't listened to Season 1 of our documentary series, you can find those episodes in the Creative Responder's podcast, feed and join me as I visit communities around Australia to explore how arts and creativity can repair, rebuild and unite.

Creative Responders: In Conversation is produced by me. Scotia Monkivitch and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson, with special thanks to Jess O'Callaghan and the team at Audiocraft for their ongoing support and encouragement. Our sound engineer is Tiffany Dimmack and original music is composed by Mikey Squire.

If you would like to become a creative responder and support your community in challenging times, we'd love to hear from you. You can join our creative responders register by going to creativerecovery.net.au

You can also connect with us on Facebook or follow us on Twitter and Instagram to learn more about our work and current projects in response to the Australian bushfire crisis. The Creative Recovery Network is assisted by the Australian government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Thanks for listening.