

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript In Conversation with Annette Carmichael, August 2023

Scotia: Welcome to Creative Responders in Conversation, I'm Scotia Monkivitch from the Creative Recovery Network, and this is our monthly interview series where we hear from creative leaders, disaster management experts, artists and community members who are strengthening disaster management through creativity.

Annette Carmichael is an award-winning choreographer, dance artist and creative producer based in Western Australia.

She's created numerous multi-art performance works with contemporary dance and community engagement at their core and I was delighted to speak with her about her most recent, and possibly most ambitious project to date - The Stars Descend.

The work was inspired by the eco-restoration efforts of Gondwana Link, an initiative set up to protect Western Australia's southwest corner from further ecological decline.

Driven by the desire to inspire hope and action, it was the outcome of a three-year project called Distributed 15 that provided training, employment, and development to regional artists and arts workers - culminating in a contemporary performance trail throughout March and April this year, involving community members in each location.

As you'll hear Annette describe in our conversation, the project was developed in a thoughtful and considered way, with First Nations engagement and collaboration with Traditional Owners in each location at the heart of the work.

The performances were staged across five regional towns along Gondwana Link's 1000 kilometre ecological pathway, with each community presenting a chapter of the story that aimed to inspire people to take action to support their local biodiversity and transform how people see and care for Country.

I was heartened and inspired by our conversation about this extraordinary project and I hope you will be too.

Please enjoy my conversation with Annette Carmichael.

Scotia: Welcome to Creative responders, Annette. I'll start by paying respects to the Traditional Owners, Ancestors and Elders, past and present, on the lands on which we're podcasting today. So I'm on Jagera Turrbal Country here in Meanjin in Brisbane. Where are you joining us from?

Annette: I'm in Menang Country here over in the state now known as Western Australia. Menang Country is right down the very bottom on the coast with a big cold southern ocean swirling around us.

Scotia: Hmm. Such beautiful colours in that ocean. Thanks for joining us to discuss your project, *The Stars Descend*. The word epic tends to get thrown around a bit, but this project is truly deserving of that description. And there's so much I'd like to get into about the execution of this ambitious and expensive project, but I think we should start at the beginning. Can you tell me about how the idea for the project came about in it and what was the initial seed that eventually grew into this very vast and beautiful project?

Annette: Yeah, sure. So it was 2000 and I had just finished a trilogy of community works called the *Beauty Index Trilogy*, which was around *Beauty and Fear* made with different communities. And I'd come off out of that and was really sitting in this space where I could see that my daughters, the people around me and myself were just we were in the thick of COVID and there was a despair that was sitting in amongst us around climate. So, you know, when the COVID pandemic hit, it kind of took up all of our brain space. And we knew about the climate emergency. But it took a back seat during the pandemic. And I just felt the urgency of that. And also that this sense that was the climate beyond hope, that that in itself was quite paralysing. And I just thought there is great work, restoration work, there is action that we can take around the climate. And was it possible to do a project that looked at this idea of climate hope and that shared the sense of success that that is actually happening? And so that was 2020. I had a few invitations from different organisations, one of them *Strut Dance* that said to me, Annette, if you want to do something really ambitious, what would you do? What's your dream project? And I said to them, Yeah, I want to do something about the climate. And they were really encouraging it and it kicked off from there.

Scotia: Fabulous. So *Gondwana Link* came on board as a major partner with this project. Can you talk about how that came about and what the partnership brought to the project in terms of where you wanted it to go? And those deep questions were asking yourself.

Annette: Yeah, so the project was structured in a network way. It got the title *Distributed 15*, which is really I was looking at the 15 layers of activity or capacity building that needed to happen in regional arts in Western Australia. So it was addressing some real kind of critical shortages around skills and opportunity for regional artists and arts workers in WA. I brought my own personal desire to look at climate action. And *Gondwana Link* is a wonderful organisation that does have its headquarters in Kinjarling, Albany, and I had previously done little bits of work for them as an environmental artist and I happened to go to a showing of a film called *Breathing Life into Boodja* that *Gondwana Link* had created, and they were showing that in my hometown of Denmark, Koorabup Belia and I at that very day, I was feeling so low about the state of the world, and I dragged myself to this screening. And it was a simple film that just showed Country that they had been restoring and that the birds were coming back, the plants were self seeding, the animals were returning, and that the action of their network of ecological community organisations, private landowners, were coming together and it was working. So that very night I went up

to one of their team members and said, Look, I've got this desire, this hope to do a project around climate hope. Do you think you would be interested? And the response was immediately positive. We set up some initial meetings. Keith Bradby, the CEO of Gondwana Link, and I got together with some of his team members and it was an instantaneous connection. Gondwana Link is audacious in its vision. It aims to create a thousand kilometre wildlife habitat pathway that runs from Margaret River Wooditchup up through to the Great Western Woodlands near Kulgooruh / Kalgoorlie. And it works in that way around empowering individuals and groups across that thousand kilometres of very, very biodiverse habitat to work together to do what they can to restore. And so we, we, we got together, we started talking and one of the attractions for me around working for them with them was that they had a very established network of relationships with First Nations elders. And because the hope of the project was that we would be performing in natural habitats that were either being restored or were protected or in need of restoration. You know, obviously we're dancing on people's Country and those relationships and and conversations were critical to any kind of success or impacts that we were going to try and have. So Gondwana Link brought that social capital really into the mix very early on. And their approach of working in that networked way really suited how I, I always work with multitudes of partners and communities and people. So we just got on really well and the partnership emerged from there. So we each brought our own strengths. What do we do well to the table and, and, and supported and encouraged in the other sections that we don't do well, but the other person does. You know, we just championed each other and advocated for each other across our different spheres. My being arts, Gondwana Link being ecological restoration.

Scotia: And what a beautiful partnership, actually, because when you talk about hope, I think about Active Hope, that idea of putting into place actions that lead us to something that's possible. And, you know, we don't often hear of the amazing projects that are actually doing that small step by a small step, which, as you said, Gondwana Link have been successful and continuing to grow this extraordinary big active hope. It's not a dream. It's a growing reality, isn't it?

Annette: And that really fed into how the whole project was structured, that those people on the ground that are planting the plants, that are doing the weeding, that are doing that work, they were the people that were absolutely embedded in this project right from the start. So we performed in a variety of locations, one of them being the Twin Creeks Conservation Reserve, which is in the Porongurup Range, and it's old farmland that's being restored by Friends of Porongurup Range, which is a very small community, a collection of people, scientists, retirees, all kinds of people coming together to restore this site. And I visited that site very early on and spoke to them. Would they be interested in having a chapter of The Stars Descend there? And most importantly, would they collaborate with us in what was created there? And in the end, most of the cast, there were 25 people that performed in chapter three were actually grass roots on the ground, ecological workers. And you can tell in the quality of their performance that they live and breathe that dirt, that place. And it just it just came through. And in how they moved and what we made together.

Scotia: Beautiful. Well, before we get into more of the process of developing the work, can we talk a bit about the performances and how the works were experienced? Yeah. So if you could talk through how it was rolled out across the various locations and the different ways people could experience the work. So one of them obviously is deep connection as a co collaborator, but there were multiple other ways that people got involved.

Annette: Yeah, for the audience, we spent a lot of time thinking about the audience's experience because one of our goals was that we would create these exquisite memories for a thousand people that they would actually value and cherish the Country and protect it if they had created an amazing memory there. And so in the end, after three years of work, *The Stars Descend*, started on the 17th of March in Wooditchup Margaret River with chapter one and ended 16 days later, 1000 kilometres away in Karlkula Park, which is an amazing active restoration by the community in Kalgoorlie. And over those 16 days, those five unique chapters of a single story, each chapter had its own artistic team that included choreographer or multiple choreographers, sound designer, visual designers, and of course, most importantly of First Nations consultants and elders advising plus scientists and local ecological care group and arts presenter as well. And so each, like basically these five chapters was spread over 16 days and the audience could choose to see one chapter or see two or three, and some people chose to see all five. We worked with Gondwana Link and with a host of tourism providers and different cultural heritage and cultural groups to create a 16 day itinerary that you could follow as an audience member. So the days between the performances, you were getting saturated in the biodiverse beauty of the Fitzgerald Biosphere, for instance, or you were able to like hear Landcare stories or experience First Nation culture in the days between. And then, so when you came to see it inside the experience of a particular chapter's performance, all of that experience was sitting in you as well, and you could see it more fully, I think, around what was being created through contemporary dance. You know, contemporary dance is such an abstract art form. I really do believe that audiences can be better prepared to view it and experience it. And one of those ways is all the things that happened in those days or moments before the actual dance starts. So we yeah, we were really excited to do that. And that itinerary has gone on to live with Gondwana Link and their website Heartland Journeys feeds into a whole lot of extra content. And so now you can still go and enjoy that travel of a thousand kilometres even though the actual performances are finished.

Scotia: Beautiful for a great legacy.

Annette: Another bit of the audience that we did as well was that audiences were mostly bussed into the location. So our hosting arts partner would set up a venue in town that would have all the usual front of house, lovely loveliness, drinks and food, and then audiences would catch a bus. That was really important to us because they were then together inside the experience and talking to other community members. It also provided us a way of controlling things like dieback or environmental hazards. We obviously wanted to protect these sites, so limiting the amount of traffic cars coming onto the site was really important. They would arrive, they would experience the dance performance, which included very substantial welcome to Countries from Elders, and then they would return and have a big community celebration. And in some places the community celebration was

as big if not bigger than the performance itself. And that was hugely important because it gave Gondwana Link a chance to talk to a lot of people. Also the local ecological group and those local artists and community performers, you know, they all got a chance to bond afterwards. So we invested a lot of time and resources into that and our local arts partners were just critical in making that a really beautiful experience for everyone.

Scotia: It's such a beautiful framing of nurture, isn't it, so much what was what was required in terms of this unknown future, really, that we're dealing with this notion of nurture. How do we actually really create a space for that to occur? Sounds like you have so many layers of that.

Annette: And it just embeds the experience as well. I think, you know, when you're looking at contemporary dance and a lot of our audience had never seen contemporary dance before, it really helps to be able to have a conversation afterwards go, Oh, what did you make of that? What was your interpretation? You know, how was that? Oh, that was better than what I expected. You know, that really helps digest the experience alongside all that really important ecological theming and and discussions around climate action. You know, what do we do next after we watch this great dance show?

Scotia: Yeah, the important questions. So you the community is so evidently a core of this project from both you and Gondwana Link. I'd love to hear how you went about structuring the various teams for the chapters or the areas that you're working on. Can you describe how you worked with the choreographers and each of those local communities? Well, the local teams that worked with the communities.

Annette: Yeah. The first two projects started with a research residency for choreographers to start with. We were looking at how can we make a single dance work that has a shared aesthetic language in a distributed way across multiple places and long period of time. So we, we did a few research residencies around that actually. And then with the next step was to employ local producers. A key challenge is that there actually aren't that many people in regional Western Australia who have experience in producing original contemporary performance works and working in community practice and so Circuit West Regional Arts WA joined with me to offer an on the job training program and we identified people that had the potential to be producers and in five towns and then embarked on training and professional development over two years. And so those producers then really advised me as Artistic Director around local artists, that might be a good addition to the team, really looking to provide regional artists with substantial employment and commissioning opportunities which are so rare. And so we just built the teams kind of as we went. I'm looking for artists both working across sound visual design and choreography that have value systems that are shared so my projects are always around building resilience and community wellbeing. So artists that are obviously interested in that and then artists that wish to collaborate, you know, wish to seek what they don't know, who can sit inside that uncertainty of collaboration and survive it and and make something, you know, they're particular people. And so that that was really critical for me. The artists that we engage, you know, some of them are extraordinarily experienced national legends like Krissy Parrot and other people this was their first major professional commission. Most

choreographers were First Nation, often working in other people's Country so not not their home Country. But almost the whole choreographic team in the end was First Nation. And that that was just extraordinary because of how then things like cultural safety became so critical to us and that those great relationships that Gondwana Link had become absolutely fundamental to every step that we took moving forward. So yeah, it's just the teams took a while. You know, I think the final artistic appointment was three months before the show opened, but we just waited until the right people were there and extraordinary team. In the end there were 88 different artists, technicians and arts workers that worked on the project. So quite a vast, vast team to lead.

Scotia: It's beautiful. I mean, you mentioned that cultural safety is such an important part, particularly essentially for projects like this. How did you approach the consultation with the Traditional Owners in those locations, understanding their intrinsic leadership in in the development of the work?

Annette: Every every approach, I guess, was different. Like all relationships, each one is unique. We employed a First Nations producer. She was learning it was her first time working in this role, Ruth Madron. And she, it meant that firstly we dedicated resources to it, which I think is critical. You know, the budget had money in it and we had a person absolutely top focus was around cultural protocols, consultation and safety. Then we created a narrative, a single story that would be told over the five chapters and the process of talking about what story would be told, provided a way of developing our relationships with Elders. So many of the Elders actually contributed to that the actual story that was told. The framework that we had those conversations around was around exclusion. We don't want to touch anything that is traditionally precious. I'm not I'm not Australian First Nations, I'm a settler artist. So the project is not being led by a Noongar artist, for instance. And also we're crossing multiple nations too. So even if I was Noongar, we were moving away from Noongar Country too. So you know all of that. So we, we started creating the story and the question was like, how do we hold the biodiversity of this vast track of land but also exclude any cultural precious material? And those two things opened up a way of talking that allowed for a lot of creativity and ideas because we knew we were going to exclude anything precious. And so Elders would be involved in those conversations alongside scientists and artists. And together we would find the gold that would sit inside the story and then we check it and we keep going back and checking it. The other element then, once the story started to emerge was Michelle Frantom, who is a digital illustrator. I asked her to come into the studio multiple times and sit with us and create these key illustrations that became the five chapters. Each chapter had a unique piece of artwork illustration that identified it, and that visual material also gave us another platform for consultation. And two of those images had to change dramatically. So Elders across most of the link were happy with them, but a couple of Elders were not. And so we were very real around excluding material that was not right. So we went back to Michelle and she created new illustrations for two of the chapters. And just that process of refining, refining and refining meant that we all felt safe and also resulted in a much better work, I think, a much more coherent story.

Scotia: So much more layered.

Annette: Yeah. The other key part of the consultation was around the selection of site. Is it okay to dance here? Is this is this a safe place? Is it not not special. It doesn't have business that happens here. You know, like is it a neutral, neutral site? So Elders were critical in that site selection in some places like Margaret River in Wooditchup you know that that was a year process selecting that site and then straight right down to the time of day we performed in some places, especially where we were in forest or performing in Ravensthorpe was very careful experience because of the massacre that happened at Cocanarup. There's a lot of consideration around exactly when was the right time to dance, and so that dictated the schedule. You know, what time does the show happen? Does it finish by sunset? But what happens in terms of the lighting rig, if it goes long and it gets dark? You know, these these are all elements of cultural safety and were highly considered across the project.

Scotia: So rich in that capacity for each little envelope to offer up so much more. Not only in the work, but in the relationships and the understanding of of place.

Annette: And it meant that, like Janine Oxenham, who's such a powerful dancer, who was one of the stars, and she travelled across you know, she performed in all the five chapters that she, she could do it. Like, that she could actually dance on these other people's Country's and be welcomed and feel safe. And the Elders would come into rehearsals and watch both her and Russell and the community performers, You know, what's the dance that's happening here and just check that she was going to be okay. You know, I think we've learnt now that cultural safety is so important. You know, artists get sick, they die. You know, it's mental health. You know, it's spiritual health. And so we took it deadly serious. Yeah. And, it meant that Janine could dance.

Scotia: It also emphasises, again, the greatest challenge we have, particularly in the arts, culture and the arts framing is the necessity of time. And you had such a capacity to open that up. I mean, you invested in time in order to see that it was done properly and done well.

Annette: Yeah, it, it absolutely matters in that we had the resources to pay consultation fees. You know, we had a dedicated person, we spent lots of time travelling and talking, you know, Yes, that all takes money and it's a really important way of spending money.

Scotia: So as these works were being developed in each of the communities, the performers were a mix of professional dancers and community members with various experience, as you mentioned earlier. I'm interested in how you, as the leader of the project and also your choreographers, how how did you navigate that? Like how do you create the space to welcome people in of all abilities and experiences and levels?

Annette: Yeah, it's what we're all about. We only had two professional dancers, 90 people, 90 community performers and two professional dancers. It's. Well, I've been doing it for so long, it's hard to unpick. I think the first thing is that we really encourage everyone to participate. So those simple statements like everyone is welcome. No dance experience

required. And in radio interviews, you know, I will say, bring us your dodgy back and your dodgy knee and and your uncertainty and your nervousness and we will look after you, we're experts in this. We have done this many times. I think that confidence that that I bring just from the from the track record matters. And then also we have this network that's just formed over, you know, ten, 15 years of doing this work - a number of these communities had done past projects with me. So there were people inside those communities that were advocating that were like, you will be looked after. She will make sure you look good, like, you know, it will be right for your body.

Scotia: So you had the trust initiated.

Annette: Yeah, that relationship of trust is so important. So we had our cast members were aged from 14 was the the minimum age couldn't be younger than 14 up to, our eldest was 85 and we're working on uneven surfaces you know we're working in the natural world. So the preparation of people physically and mentally and in terms of their ability, spatial ability to see around them all those skills that we might take for granted as dancers, we have to train them into people so that they're safe. And then because our projects really are focussed on learning the skills of resilience. So being calm, learning how to achieve clarity when you're uncertain, building connections with other people and relying on other people to help you through. It's an important ingredient in our projects that people are differently abled because that teaches us how to connect, how to face challenge and succeed, that we can do it and and that we're going to do it together. So the projects, it's at the very heart of the projects, and it's in the language that we use that we're inviting everyone in. For the choreographers, you know, some choreographers have not had experience in this world before, so the training is very pragmatic. You know, this is what a warm up needs to look like. We need to teach balance. We need to practice walking on uneven surfaces. You know, the real the logistics of the human form moving through space need to be considered in in the warm ups. And then that it is really important that choreography, actually the movement material comes from the people that perform it. So I think that really helps keep people safe. They are only offering what their bodies can do. Our jobs as choreographers are to sequence those movements, highlight what is strong, edit out what is not, and then build in all the other gold that's part of choreography, like the spatial relationships between groups and people. The sense of dynamic change that might happen in the how the music is composed. And also we wrap people in really strong visual design. So the visual design elements are, they're professional artists working at the highest quality we can get so that the community performers are immersed in this very beautiful professional environment where then they're allowed to bring their gold, their integrity, their connection to that place, their connection to each other, which is at the artistic essence of what we're making. So. We need. We need them. We need them. I think that was there. We need diversity in our casts if we're going to talk about the fact that climate action needs to be taken by everyone. So it is just essential.

Scotia: What kind of feedback did you receive from the audiences and also those participants? Did you have a sense of the reach or the impact, or were there particular highlights from you that resonated those wishes that you had for the work?

Annette: Yeah, Audiences are so interesting, aren't they? You make something and then you ask them what did they take away from it? Overall, we had 1500 people view the works and we know, we did our Culture Count survey, of course, and the comment fields are where the gold is. It's it's so varied. So, you know, there was a there was an audience member in chapter two who really was grumpy about the amount of money that was being spent on the project. And he actually said that the moment Aunty started speaking language on that place and then the performance unfolded, he got it. He got what this project was doing, that climate action can be driven through this creative process, through this immersive process for audiences. So comments like that, other comments are around. Oh we couldn't believe how good it was, like we know, we know. We know these people. I know that guy. He works. He works on the farm, or that dude's the local health provider or whatever, you know. I didn't know he was going to be that good. It's this kind of that marvel, you know, which we all I see in our community projects, people just don't realise how amazing they actually are or the people are around them. And so, you know, performance gives a chance for you to see your neighbour actually do something you never thought that they could do and just be exquisite at it. So there's lots of those comments. This feeling of hope did come through - that people were not aware of GondwanaLink and the project did raise awareness. Their website traffic went up massively because of the project and so people were heartened that Gondwana Link existed and that there was things they could do. And then lots of comments around the First Nations welcome, the performers, the choreographers, this feeling of authority that Elders had in the project around Landcare and cultural care that that people could see that and it was present and that mattered.

Scotia: I suppose you can see it and it's concrete and is there was, there is sense that then people took away that notion of action because that's the key isn't it. Like these processes and engagements in immersion are about saying what can I do as an individual.

Annette: That's right. So, you know, the practicalities, we had the local ecological groups have information stalls at the performance, there's a really beautiful example that happened at Friends of Porongurup range. So those people that look after the Twin Creeks Conservation Reserve, they have been operating for a long time. They have 100 members. They've never had any First Nation members. And then on the night of the performance, 15 Noongar people signed up to join their group and become members. You know, that's all, that matters. And they tell us how meaningful that is and how transforming that is for that group. So things like that, you know, come from this project.

Scotia: So I'm interested, I mean, you talking a lot about resilience and connection and part of the work of thinking about climate change and also disaster management and feeding and trying to support a development in the disaster management sector around preparedness. That idea of building people's capacity to be able to cope with whatever the future holds and whatever that means in terms of ongoing cascading impacts that we will be living. How does your sense of a project like this what what is it that it brings? You've kind of mentioned that in a little way, but if we're talking about trying to see that these projects weave and are so instrumental in the development of people's disaster preparedness or climate sustainability, what do you think are the core things that a project

like yours, and particularly when you're thinking about a modality of dance which wouldn't be on people's radar necessarily when we're thinking about disaster preparedness, how how from your perspective, does that weave?

Annette: Well, first and foremost, cities around awareness. So there was built into this project an awareness and education around how critical the climate emergency is. And then the awareness was brought into that real local laser focus of this place in our town. Can we restore it? How is it being restored? Is it working? What's dying? What's not working? You know those kind of conversations. Additionally, because the choreography was created based on inspiration from the natural world, people just became aware of like, Oh, that banksia seed, we're making a dance about that Banksia seed, that's from here or this, this, that, that actually needs fire for it to germinate. What happens when fire goes through here? So it brings those conversations really to the forefront. What also happened in this project is that you knew, say in Northcliffe that had faced massive fire has gone through incredible disaster, Chapter Two held fire in in the performance and also held the extraordinary beauty of the orchids that come after fire. And for that community, they gave them a chance to remember that they had survived that fire and they had worked together. And one of the performers was actually the fire chief for Northcliffe. He danced in the show. And so that memory, I think that remembering that we faced it and we did it, how did we prepare? How would we prepare differently? What would we do the same again? Performance gives space for conversation and contemplation that we often don't have in our busy lives, in our diverted lives. So the fact that it creates a moment in time when you all come together, you remember or you experience new and you talk. That helps with being prepared for disaster and you're building relationships of trust. So again, in Northcliffe, one of the performers said, I have had a difficult relationship with my neighbour. That neighbour has been in this project and our relationship has changed. We're connected better, we're connected more. And in disaster, you know, that relationship of connection and trust becomes critical for responding in that in that moment and then also in the aftermath of disaster. So yeah, we can, it matters.

Annette: But dance. Why dance? I thank you. US. I didn't answer that bit. Yeah, well.

Scotia: You know, again, it's not necessarily an artistic form that people think about in these bigger pictures. And for us, certainly from the credit for covenant work, it's always, you know, always trying to say that there's a multitude of ways of engaging and that, you know, we need to use the whole. So what is it about dance? I mean, it's your life really isn't that in it?

Annette: Yeah, I'm a dance artist. I mean, it's how I address the the problems I face in the world. Dance is really great when emotions are hard to talk about. We can we can hold a tenderness in how we move without having to speak the words. Or we can hold a sense of urgency or despair, and it can live in our bodies without giving it voice. If, if, if that is too much. It's also I love contemporary dance because it has a way of holding complexity. You know, we don't speak something into narrow words. We can hold a variety of histories, cultural knowledge, personal knowledge, personal experience that all can live inside dance. We don't have to choose what's in and out sometimes, you know. A breath is a

breath taken by many people in many different ways. And it's allowed to be. So you know, works around climate change, climate hope. And also I've made works around, you know, the end of family violence or around solastalgia or grief around loss of connection to Country. You know, hard things to say but to move them in our bodies. There's something about that process that makes it accessible for audiences to see and then also to interpret or reinterpret based on their own experiences, too. In the end, I think contemporary dance is a very accessible form.

Scotia: Annette the work is called *The Stars Descend*, can you tell us about how you came to that title and how it fed the narrative throughout the work?

Annette: Yeah, it took a while to reach this title for this work. And stars became important very early on for this idea, this question of how do the stars gaze upon us? The stars are in up in the sky. If they turn their gaze downwards and looked down on us and looked out across the Gondwana Link and the southern part of Western Australia, you know, what would they see? What are they seeing? And so I knew that stars were really important. And then also what stars hold is this idea of time because of when we're talking about climate, we're talking about time long ago time and the time of now, and the the meeting point of those different times and the critical nature of that. So stars have this way of holding this idea of time. And then for us humans you know, they are a symbol of hope, a symbol of perspective as well. So all these elements were really important. And then the story that the show tells, I'll tell it to you now. So it starts with this question of how did the stars gaze upon us and the stars feel the ocean rising in Wooditchup. They feel it rising and rising and rising and there is this sense of alarm in the stars. They turn their gaze downwards and they look, and they decide to descend. They fall into the ocean and land in the sea bed that is this the fertile ground that was once inhabited by thousands of people. It's the land between the old coast of Gondwana Land and the coast of now. In that moment of falling, the birds of Karkula, the Great Western Woodlands, they see the stars falling and they start singing out to the stars. The stars have landed in the ocean into this fertile ground, and they can hear the birdsong. In that moment they transform into the sea stars of the Leeuwin Current, and they crawl ashore. And that's chapter one. In chapter two, the stars are sea stars in Wooditchup. They hear the birdsong, the starriness is inside these sea stars and they send tendrils of fire across the Country towards the southern forests near Northcliffe. They travel via these tendrils and they arrive in Northcliffe and they bring fire. The forest burns and after the fire those orchids start to come up from underground and they represent that incredible beauty that is the southern forests, this, this, this thing that can live and happen after fire. And so the stars are inside those orchids. You know, orchids look like stars? They're now inside these orchids, they grow and then they wither and they die. And the stars descend down into the granite below, which is a big granite shelf is underneath Western Australia. They travel through that granite, still faintly hearing the birds, and they're in that sparkle and shimmer of the granite until they reach the ancient Porongurup Range. And here, hearing the birds, they start shimmering upwards. They shimmer up through that granite and they burst up into the night sky. Chapter three happened at nighttime with the Porongurup Range behind, where as the sun was setting actually to the stars, burst up into that night sky and they need to decide will they just keep on ascending or will they stay? And they hear the birds sing and they fall

again and they land in the water that pools around granite. They travel through that water towards Fitzgerald Biosphere. They're floating along. And as they float, they sense the history of that Country, its strength. They also sense the deep sadness and grief from what has happened there. And they enter the Fitzgerald Biosphere. And sensing that grief, they decide to completely dissolve. They do this so they can enter everything. They enter the plants, they wrap around ancient stone, they enter the animals. And in chapter four in this She Oak grove near Ravensthorpe on a Sunday, an emu comes and it drinks the water and the stars enter her and she can hear most clearly the birds of the Great Western woodlands singing from Kalgoorlie. And so she starts to walk towards Kalgoorlie. As she's walking, she pauses and she looks back to the west towards Wooditchup Margaret River and she looks towards Northcliffe, Porongurup towards the Fitzgerald Biosphere. Now she's turning, she imprints the stars into the Country as she travels through now entering into that changing country as she heads towards the Great Western Woodlands, she arrives. She arrived on the 1st of April 2023 to this cacophony of people, of birds of a celebration of her arrival and the bringing of the stars to the Great Western Woodlands. And in that moment, she lays an egg that holds a universe of knowledge around care for our Country and its future. That egg cracks open and the Gargala, the silky pear, which is native to Karkula Park, that silky pear grows from this emu egg and its seeds are like tiny stars. And that night air catches those stars and they spread out across the Country to restore it. That's the story.

Scotia: So evocative, such beautiful poetics.

Annette: And so you can see how the stars were really useful in that. They appear in many different ways in our environment. Inside the orchid, inside a seed, inside the granite, inside the sparkle of water. And so they became this universal symbol that we could link in with all of the different very different Countries that we were working across. So many different authors of that story. You know, like I can tell you who belongs to which bit of every bit of it.

Scotia: What's next for you Annette? You've had a bit of a. Do you imagine a future iteration of this project? Or do you have other projects that you're starting to dream on?

Annette: We're just we're focusing on the legacy of this project. So, you know, it came Distributed 15 is the name of the project that created The Stars Descend. It has 15 threads of activity and inquiry. Thread 15 is the legacy thread that incorporates a range of things - film projects, writing projects, Landcare, you know, Gondwana Link's work. So I'm just sitting with that and there's still like another year of of legacy activity rolling out and connecting with those communities that created each of the chapters and the artists as well is an ongoing process. And our exit strategy out of community is quite substantial. So it keeps on going. I'm just going to sit in this for a bit longer. No, nothing new on the horizon just yet.

Scotia: Well, we'll include the show nights for the listeners to find out more about your work and access the photographs and the material from The Stars Descend, which have so beautifully documented actually across all of those locations. It's such a legacy already in

itself. We wish you all the best and thank you for joining us on Creative Responders Annette.

Annette: Thanks Scotia, good luck with it all. Thank you.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders in Conversation, a podcast from the Creative Recovery Network and a special thanks to Annette for sharing so generously the process behind this inspiring work.

I encourage you to check out Gondwana Link's website and find out more about the great work they are doing in eco-restoration for the region. You'll find the link in our show notes along with links to Annette's work and images and videos of The Stars Descend performances.

If you're new to the podcast, you might also be interested in our documentary episodes where we deep dive into communities and projects that are harnessing the arts to strengthen disaster management. They're all in the Creative Responders podcast feed alongside our In Conversation episodes if you scroll back you'll find them all.

You can also find our full archive at [www dot creative recovery dot net dot au](http://www.creative-recovery.net.au).

This podcast is produced by me and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson. Our sound engineer is Tiffany Dimmack.

We'll be back next month with another conversation.

Thanks for listening.