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Keynote Address

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I don't want to talk about arts - related transformation in an economical or physical sense, but rather the role that the arts might play in the **inner life, the social and psychological or expressive transformation** of a place. The two regional places I'm connected to are Tathra, in the far south coast of NSW where I live, and now Burnie, in Tasmania, where Ten days on the Island is now based.

If I were to define myself by category, I would describe myself as an artist and citizen. As a freelance theatre and opera director working in Europe, America and Australasia I belong to a global arts community. For the past 12 years I've also been a proud member of my local regional community in Tathra. And now I'm a resident of Wynyard in the northwest of Tasmania, and a proud member of the Tasmanian arts community.

I've also had the privilege of directing four of Australia's major performing arts companies, the state opera companies of WA, Victoria and Queensland, and three of Australia's prestigious international arts festivals including the 60+ year old Perth International Arts Festival (Australia's oldest), and the 40+ year old Sydney Festival (Australia's most popular).

Underpinning everything I do personally and professionally is a sense of community and an evangelical belief in art's critical function as the beating heart of an empathetic society.

We live in a time of turbulence, of anxiety and uncertainty.

The new normal seems to be one surreal episode after another of tectonic social/political rupture. We're confronted and numbed by stories of gross excess, xenophobia and corruption, images of millions of displaced peoples, violence and terrifying ignorance. We're obsessed by material stuff, the digital devices, data and technologies we need to get through the day, distracted by the media and entertainment industries, global markets and reckless tweets... manipulated by industries preying on our fears around beauty, ageing, love, physical pain and loneliness.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed, tiny and impotent in the face of it all. I sure do. I know I'm not alone in my experience over the last couple of years (since November 8, 2016, to be precise, with the shock of Trump's election) of succumbing to despair. Last year I experienced an episode of depression that lasted several months. The reality of the world we live in hit me like a train. Like millions of others I was shocked and traumatised by the racism, lies, misogyny, dumbing down, xenophobia...the list goes on. I grew fragile, confused, teary and hopeless, none of which I am by nature. Underpinning my depression was this sense that the world was going to hell in a hand-basket and as an artist and a woman I felt powerless to do anything about it.

Alongside yoga, good friends and some excellent antidepressants, I am grateful for the catalysts that eventually pulled me out of my blues and tap into the power of optimism once more: For me, this was the imperative to embrace a stronger, more conscious and active role as citizen in my communities (local, national and global).

A couple of things strengthened me: books, of course, and coincidentally, I was incredibly encouraged by the **#MeToo movement**, the global surge of women taking back their power. But also challenged to question my own complicity in the patriarchal system, leading me to the uncomfortable truth/shame that over the decades of my career I have not only internalised, minimised and normalised sexist behaviour I have experienced, but I have learned to “tone myself down” from the firebrand feminist I was in my thirties to make myself more user-friendly in the corporate/political/boardroom environments I found myself in as Artistic Director of major festivals and arts companies.

To survive this long I've learned when to shut up, to compromise, be diplomatic. I've sat silently wincing at boorish boardroom behaviour, patiently ignored sighs and eye-rolls and mansplaining, I've been told not to be over-dramatic or over-emotional. For me, the #metoo movement was a revelation and I hope an empowerment that can be part of the healing of our social malaise more broadly.

Yes, we live in a time of turbulence, of anxiety and uncertainty. But it's also a time of limitless potential and possibility; and the state of flux we're experiencing, while unsettling, is also an opportunity - indeed a challenge - to reimagine the future. In my new role as Artistic Director of Ten Days On The Island my challenge – one I embrace wholeheartedly - is to connect as many people as possible across Tasmania with inspiring examples of the transformative, connective power of art in our communities.

Lately I'm noticing the word **empathy** resonating in conversations about how artists can help people make sense of the world. I concur with Peter Bazalgette's (former Chair of Arts Council England) view of empathy as 'a glue that enables families, communities and countries to function in a civil and civilised manner. If you can see things from someone else's point of view, then you can go on to act compassionately towards them' and that 'arts and popular culture, with their

stories about the human condition are, if you like, the empathy gymnasium.'

Recently I was in Melbourne for a lecture by the American author Sarah Sentilles who sees art practice as activism, nothing less than a way of imagining 'the total reinvention of the world', which makes her sound like a crackpot, but actually it's a very practical idea.

She says:

'The act of making something, of saying this is what I see, this is the version of the world I see or hope for, reminds us that we can make better neighbourhoods, we can make better cities, we can make better governments. It is a reminder of the constructed status of the world and that each of us is a maker.'

These big ideas - that art functions as a representation of our human potential for total reinvention of the world, that art makes humans more empathetic to each other, and has truth-telling power – point to the power of art and chime with my own philosophy, that our festivals should harness art's power for our communities. My zeal for this task is fueled by reminding myself of my three big themes:

The first is about **TIME**. Our time, right now. In 2018, the seemingly oppositional dynamics of anxiety and uncertainty on one hand AND limitless potential on the other - make the arts, humanities and creative expression more needed in our communities than ever.

The second is about **PLACE**. The ideal environment to create an arts festival – a celebratory meeting place for big ideas to unite and transform a community - is right here in regional Australia, in places like Temora and Tathra and Burnie, rather than Sydney or Melbourne - or New York or Paris or Buenos Aires or any of the world's great metropoli.

The third and most important is about **BEING HUMAN**. The very fact of our being human should be self-evident but it's under siege. The more banks, digital surveillance and social media harvest our data, the more addicted we become to our screens and devices, the more our days rely on microchips, swipe cards and bar codes, it seems to me the more urgently we need ways to reaffirm our humanity. We are not (yet) mere pixels in some massive digital matrix. We are families, communities, lovers, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, neighbours, friends and citizens. Individually and collectively, we need ways to rejoice in being human, in all its revolutionary, radical, wild, messy, euphoric, despairing, complex, emotional and potentially transformative power.

That's why we need festivals....

Ten Days on the Island may not be the biggest festival in Tasmania, but I believe it has the greatest potential to be a genuinely transformational force in our community. We are already leading the way by the creating a new festival model. We have reimagined the Ten Days of our Festival as An Epic Adventure Over 3 Weekends, a state-wide journey that flows across 3 spectacular regional heartlands, starting in Tasmania's spectacular North West for the first weekend; across to the North East for the second weekend and finishing in Hobart and the South. Binding those three heartlands together is the overarching concept of **CITIZENSHIP**.

What exactly do I mean by "citizenship"?

Here I return to **Sarah Sentilles'** book **Draw Your Weapons** - a powerful cri de coeur arguing society's urgent need of art in violent times, and it cuts like a knife through the white noise of the zeitgeist. When I read it last year one phrase leapt out and seized my imagination. Challenging Susan Sontag's highly emotive response to a photographic image of war she writes: 'It is not merely compassion that is called for, but citizenship'.

Citizenship, like love, is not passive but active. Citizenship is action. Citizenship is activism. There is personal responsibility to each other in Citizenship. We are bound together by it.

Meaningful discussion on this theme necessarily ruptures conventional definitions of citizenship. This is not a discussion about citizenship as the vertical relationship between the state and the individual, or the social, political and legal rights and protections enjoyed by a nation's subjects. This is a conversation about what scholars call 'citizenship as a lived experience'. That is, citizenship not only as a concept 'central in the analysis of identity, participation, empowerment, human rights and the public interest'; but 'an embodied view of citizenship....an understanding of citizenship as a practice.'

In regional communities we see citizenship as a practice, as a lived experience ALL the time. I have just seen it in Tathra, during and after the March bushfires that destroyed 70 homes, 15 in my street.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in that very musical community, the response on the ground has been to bring people together to play music and listen to music, and a lot of that is happening at the magnificent Tathra Hotel, which currently has a DA application in to Council to build a 150-seat black box theatre out the back, a performance space with state-of-the-art technical equipment and seating that will finally give our region a venue of professional equipment standards and levels of audience comfort comparable to venues in metropolitan areas and of appropriate standard for the fine professional artists in the region.

But more than that, as a transformational statement and symbol, the Tathra Hotel Theatre will tell the world that this community values artists and that artists value this community. That this community knows the role culture and the arts can play in creating an empathetic and progressive society.

As Sentilles says, if you can make something, it shows we can remake something. The Tathra Hotel is a quite literal animation of Picasso's idea that "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction". And it will provide an extraordinary creative resource for the flourishing (and exponentially growing) professional performing arts community of the South Coast for both **making** and **performing** new work for audiences in the region; a hub for shared cultural and creative experiences in the already welcoming environment of the Tathra Hotel. Transformation indeed. **Embodied, enacted citizenship.**

Compassion is a concern for many contemporary artists and thinkers. Composer Nigel Westlake's song cycle *Compassion* is an expression of love for a lost son. Tasmanian comedian Hannah Gadsby, who famously wears her sensitivity with pride, describes her global smash hit show *Nanette* as both an analysis and an artistic expression of empathy. And I was interested to read Gadsby's comment that 'A lot of people on

the margins are denied the chance to be constructive citizens. And I think that is the shame of having such a narrow expression of what being a good human is.' In his latest book *Australia Reimagined*, the social theorist Hugh Mackay cites the fragmentation of social cohesion as the cause of an escalation of anxiety and depression in contemporary society. He suggests a more compassionate, empathetic society begins with us making real connections with the real people in our own neighbourhood.

We agree. In 2019 we will be framing Ten Days on the Island as a state-wide meeting place across multiple neighbourhoods, where festival artists and festival audiences alike are invited to explore and celebrate 'the meaning that citizenship has in people's lives and the ways in which people's social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens.'

Neighbourhood is another potent concept in regional Australia. Country people know their neighbours. With this comes a sense of personal responsibility and accountability both socially and in an artistic context. When you know many of the audience by name (unlikely in the city) and you're likely to bump into them in Bunnings the next day, the authenticity artist/audience connection is vital. And there is ritual in our expressions of neighbourhood.

The ubiquitous rhythms of communal life, the shared meal, the informal after-work gathering, neighbourhood systems, even talking about the weather and enjoying a band at the local pub are rituals of goodwill that underpin the creative process particularly in regional Australia; and seem to me the embodiment of “expressive cooperation” as described by Richard Sennett in his book *Together: The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation* (2012). Sennett says that these rituals “enable expressive cooperation in religion, in the workplace, in politics and in community life.”

One of the pleasures of my job as a Festival Director is to share the beauty, poetry and even magnificence in purposeful syntheses between the cultural and civic life of a community. My job is to create moments for a community to transcend the everyday and become extraordinary, to create new narratives through shared experience.

For me, purposeful participation in storytelling, ideas, music, visual art, discussion, food and performances is not just Lived Citizenship, but Expressive Citizenship, Creative Citizenship.

Not every artist sees their work as activism, but increasingly I see the work of a festival director is a kind of activism, because quite apart from its celebration of artistic expression, the work festivals do carries a civic and community dimension. We create empathetic, tolerant, open-minded meeting places for people to gather to celebrate our shared humanity through music, movement, ideas and experiences. Places for vigorous but respectful differences of opinion and hope for the future of our communities. Places of transformation.

Ten Days on the Island (TDOTI) is re-imagining the festival model to be a better citizen.

The festival as citizen, the artist as citizen:

Regional home base: We’re walking the regional walk, not just talking the talk. Last year TDOTI moved its home base from Hobart to Burnie in the NW of Tasmania. Most of our team is resident there, our board travels there for meetings as do our significant artists and collaborators.

Long-term relationships and partnerships: We’re not just FIFO, or short-term shock and awe. TDOTI will develop long-term, meaningful relationships with all the communities and the Tasmanian artists we work with. Conversations about what we might achieve together in the 2021 festival are starting now.

Legacy: A longer-term approach means that we can work with communities to develop projects that strengthen capacity and build creative and cultural confidence in those communities.

Local/national/global – in that order: We are all global citizens now. TDOTI is an international festival in constant conversation with a matrix of creators, thinkers and communities all over the planet. While it’s a global conversation, our international program is developed in the very specific context of the place we’re presenting it in.

Regional uniqueness: Each weekend program will be a completely unique experience, created to respond to each distinctive local landscape, people, stories, places and creativity.

Tasmanian innovation, Tasmanian artists and companies: Local artists will always be programmed alongside nationally and globally significant artists. Developing new Tasmanian work for local, national and global audiences is central to our charter.

As citizen, optimist and idealist who has been through some dark moments, I'm reassured - and want to reassure you - that in these troubled times, artists have the potential, and I would argue, the responsibility, to help make the world a better place.

To quote Bertolt Brecht: 'In the dark times / Will there also be singing? / Yes, there will also be singing / About the dark times.' But artists don't just sing about the dark times. We subvert the darkness by singing with lightness and joy. We turn dance into physical poetry, we hang from chandeliers, share mad ideas and tell each other wondrous, strange, disturbing, funny and confounding stories in which we find meaning and beauty.

In these troubled times, you need to know that what you do matters. Exploring the beauty, ambiguity and the complexity of the human experience - this is important life-affirming and transformational work that artists do within our communities.