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Outer Urban Projects shows the true face of contemporary Australia

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When we talk about art, we often talk about intrinsic truth. A work is celebrated because it is saying something about our society, about who we are and what we believe to be important. This idea of being truthful is bandied about in the theatre a lot. It's what we aim for. Beyond anything else we want the work to be truthful. And powerful – that's bandied about a lot too.

The truth is, Australian theatre is rarely truthful. The industry has prevented it from being truthful because the worlds of the plays are almost always white. We pay too much to go to the theatre which is attended by white audiences who watch white actors play white, usually middle-class characters. Our real community is not reflected up on those stages. Our stages are white and so are our drama schools. Our sense of ourselves is of a white, middle-class society. That's who we believe we are. That's what our theatre industry is reinforcing. It's a great big lie.



Cross-art collaborations: Dante Soffra and Kominos Zervos, stars of Poetic License. PAUL JEFFERS/GETTY IMAGES

Recently Ursula Yovich, Shari Sebbens and Fayssal Bazzi, three of Australia's very fine actors, made a plea to the industry for colourblind casting, which basically means being given a role because you're a good actor and your cultural background and colour are irrelevant. Yovich has been working as an actor for 16 years and in all that time has had just one audition for a character not defined as Aboriginal. Since September 11, Bazzi talks of being cast as either an aggressive type or a terrorist with no regard of his talent and only because he has the right look.

Sadly this plea has been made before. Wonderful Australian actors have been ignored and squeezed out of the industry because the offers were limited by their not being white. They have been great talents whose craft has been wasted. Actors with accents are almost always shunned. Why? We have a multitude of accents in this country. Australian theatres reinforce that we all sound the same. Another lie.

It's not only the actors who have been silenced and disregarded. Indigenous and culturally diverse playwrights and directors have been mostly squeezed out of the industry, or never given entry. Who is going to tell the powerful stories of the dispossessed? Who is going to represent us more truly? It is these playwrights and directors who know the world of dispossession.

Outer Urban Projects is a performing arts organisation that collaborates with young people and their communities in Melbourne's outer northern suburbs. These suburbs include places like Lalor, Mill Park, Broadmeadows and Sunbury in the cities of Hume and Whittlesea. Close to 50 per cent of Melbourne's population live in our outer-suburban rim. These suburbs house about a third of young people under 25. It's a vast population with very little access to basic services available to those closer to the city. In Hume, there are people from 145 nationalities. This is who we are. But who would know it when we cross the plush auditoriums to enter the theatre? Many people feel that the theatre is an unwelcoming place which is perceptive, because if they should attend they would very quickly learn that the art doesn't include them.

Outer Urban Projects specialises in producing and presenting high-calibre arts projects that combine street, cultural, contemporary and classical forms. The company is driven by the vibrant cultural mix and stories of the northern suburbs and the racial, social and class inequities that challenge young people in the outer north of Melbourne.

This is not a community theatre company in the old sense where the work is restricted to a short period of development on a burning issue and a couple of performances in a local area and then moves on to do another project with a new community. This a far more ambitious and exciting company which has a long-term vision and program that is taking aim and launching the complex and true face of contemporary Australia into public arenas.

The company works with a team of senior, mid-career and emerging artists. The team has decades of professional practice in the mainstream and community cultural sector. There is very little on the outer urban belt that consistently engages young people in long-term, quality arts activities, especially those aimed at impacting on their lives creatively, emotionally, socially and economically. The company is committed to cross-art collaborations. It asks us to imagine young people in these public and new housing areas in outer-urban Broadmeadows, Glenroy, Epping or Craigieburn, whose origins span five continents, bringing all this experience into the work, engaging in the most cutting-edge experimental collaborative arts practice. It asks us to imagine further, outer suburban community audiences together with Melbourne Festival audiences seeing the work for its artistic merit as one would a major company with its latest work from Berlin. This is inclusion, the turning of disadvantage around and the inspirational goal that Outer Urban Projects sets itself.

Kate Gillick, the company's CEO, is interested in working against the ghettoisation of culture and art practice. She wants the company to have a presence, legitimacy and impact outside its urban belt confines. "It's not just like a sense of 'Oh these people out there need art'," she says. "These people out there have art. But it needs to be recognised and supported and developed." She wants the work, "to nudge the dominant classes and say, we are here too and you know what, what we have is good. Our work is equal to yours. It may even be better."

The work is electric. It is rich with story and has an amazing life force. Perhaps this has to do with the performers having something quite ethereal, a kind of hunger, a passionate need to express themselves. It is a mix of forms and styles bound together by tight and fearless choreography. It is vibrant. There's an element of great joy which I have rarely witnessed in any performance. It's contagious. And the contagion works to excite and at times boisterously enthuse an entire audience. And it's an audience which is unlike most theatre audiences. It is filled with people, often entire families from grandparents to small children, and like the performers on stage, from cultural backgrounds from all over the world. It's a true and powerful reflection of who we are.

Poetic License is their new show, made in association with Footscray Community Arts Centre and the Melbourne Writers Festival and featuring a number of performers, including poets Komninos Zervos, 63 and Dante Soffra, 13. Outer Urban Projects' creative producer/director, Irine Vela, has introduced the idea of using comic masterpiece *The Frogs* by Aristophanes, in which the god Dionysus believed he could save an ancient city from ruin by bringing a dead poet back to life. The company has taken inspiration from this story. Promotional material declares: "The world, the cities, the neighbourhoods with all its apparent misery, bigotry, wars, and individual struggles is in need of poetry and a great poet." It is an ambitious and timely work using poetry, music and rap that riffs on the new and the old and the power and limitations of words.

This is a company that tackles big ideas while at the same time pushes the boundaries of our cultural identity and tells the truth about who we are.

Patricia Cornelius is an award-winning playwright. Poetic License is at the Footscray Community Arts Centre, August 27-29. mwf.com.au For more on the Melbourne Writers Festival, see Page 14 and Books.