

Battle Cry from a Tired Artist

Alice Canton - Performer and Theatremaker

Being an independent theatre-artist in Auckland right now is pretty fucking glorious.

Artists are talking, connecting, sharing knowledge, resources, and ideas. Every year, graduating students flood into our city, injecting us with new life and passion. Venues like Basement, Q and Auckland Live are giving us space in the central city to present work and develop new audiences. Basement and Q's creative development programmes are giving us a chance to grow and upskill. The revived Auckland Fringe Festival has galvanized our community into action. Auckland Arts Festival has connected us to international presenters. There is a better understanding of cross-disciplinary collaboration - visual arts, dance, music, and design are becoming integrated in a more comprehensive theatre-making practice. Work is becoming more political, in content and in form. We are driving community engagement events like forums and workshops that support our work, and give multiple points of entry to our patrons. I see work two to three times a week, and it feeds me. It stimulates me, it frustrates me, it provokes me. It gives me clarity of purpose and craft. As an artist living and working in this city, I seek comfort in my community. I draw on the strength of others living in my community. I love my community.

Being an independent theatre-artist in Auckland right now is pretty fucking hard.

It's so expensive. We are starving. Literally. We are poor. So fucking poor. We are giving up every day to move into full-time desk jobs, just to pay the bills. We are making art in our lunch breaks, if we can muster the energy. We support each other, but we are in a competitive market: funding, venues, audiences, rehearsal spaces, and personnel. Some of us are exhausted from fighting. Some of us have given up the fight.

It just isn't a sustainable option, financially or emotionally to operate as an independent theatre-artist in New Zealand. There is a brain drain in our industry. Our highly-skilled makers are heading overseas - Melbourne, Berlin, New York - to carve out work that satisfies their authentic artistic desires, rather than conforming to the limited opportunities available here. They aren't coming back.

But there is a greater and much more pressing issue which has emerged as a priority in our industry: inclusivity. There is a distinct lack of cultural diversity in politics, decision-making and the media. The systems we have created (or inherited) don't give us much room for asserting positive action towards changing this. I believe one of these reasons is in the currency of storytelling - those desperate to tell their stories struggle to find a place to be seen, let alone heard. Art, and furthermore, theatre, is a place where this change can happen. Where we can create a space for a greater diversity of voices to arise, and move forward (preferably, but not necessarily) together. Where we can innovate, challenge, and inspire other sectors to follow.

Auckland is New Zealand's most populous city, and known for having a large multicultural mix: 10% Māori, 14% Pacific Islander, and 22% Asian. Currently, two-thirds of New Zealand's Asian population live in the Auckland Region. And yet, despite statistics indicating these groups make up 46% of Auckland's rich cultural Rubik's Cube, this is not reflected in our theatre-makers or our audiences. That's almost half. Half.

Disappointingly, things get less culturally diverse the more mainstream the company or organisation. Mainstage theatre staff and programming are still not an indication of the world in which we live. And that sucks for the 46%. We do not see ourselves reflected in the stories. We are mis-represented (through ignorance or malice: rendered into simplified lumps). We are unseen on-stage, on the poster, in the programme, in the foyer.

Perhaps those calling the shots don't understand what the effect of being excluded has on our psyche. How does one exist in a world where you don't exist? This reality needs to change. The industry needs to actively create pathways for new practitioners and audiences to connect. Create opportunities for content that speaks directly to our experience, and space to share this. To celebrate it. To wrestle with it. To critique it. To build skills. Be stretched. Be questioned. Be encouraged.

I'm not asking for back pats or hand-outs. I'm asking to for industry leaders to take some responsibility for the increasingly socially exclusive world we are screaming toward, and to show some courage. Stand up, or maybe more importantly, stand aside. Maximise our visibility as artists from and for these diverse communities. I could justify with some sickening economic rationale, but as an artist I don't actually care about increasing your revenue stream.

There's one of three things that could happen.

One, you invite us to your party. It will be the best fucking party any of your friends have been to, and we will bring all the noise and colour and light and laughter and play and desire and you will be relieved and in a constant state of wonderment.

Two, we'll take by force. We'll storm your house, set fire to your kitchen, and kill your tropical fish.

Three, we will have our own party. It will be the best fucking party any of your friends, family, work colleagues and neighbours have ever been to, and we will bring all the noise and colour and light and laughter and play and desire, and you will stand outside longing to be invited but no one will hear your melancholic whimpers because we'll all be inside having such a bloody great time.

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