

Witness

PERFORMANCE.DISCUSSION.COMMUNITY

Breakdown of Witness activity and coverage

March 2018-March 2019

Reviewing contemporary performance is our core work, but we believe that a wider context for reviews is crucial. Witness aims to lift performance critique beyond the reductive product reviews that currently dominate Australian performance criticism and to counter disparities and inequalities that exist in conventional critical coverage.

To expand this context, *Witness* published long form reviews, podcasts, videos and written features that looked into crucial issues concerning the industry, questioning assumptions and elucidating Australian theatre history in an easily accessible public forum.

We believe that the health of Australian critical culture depends on a multiplicity of critical voices, since Australian performance critique remains overwhelmingly white and male. We worked throughout 2018 to foster relationships with an increasing pool of diverse critics. We believe that the diversity of the voices we commissioned and published is reflected strongly in two major ways: *what* work was covered, and *how* it was covered.

Over the year, Witness gained a readership of 44,657 users, with a total of 117,188 pageviews. We succeeded in attracting 211 paying subscribers.

What we published

In total, from March 2018 to March 2019, Witness published 282 works by a total of 24 authors. They included:

- * 201 reviews of 232 performances
- * 25 longform feature essays
- * 20 podcasts (The Witness Podcast, The Witness Interview and Witness Spotlight)
- * 15 videos

Features, podcasts and videos

Through 2018 we published 20 longform features canvassing important issues in the performance industry. Many of these reached a wide audience and were among the most popular posts that we published.

Popular feature highlights were: Alison Croggon's essays on News Media and the Arts, and the Geoffrey Rush trial and #MeToo (which will be republished in a #MeToo anthology forthcoming Picador); Carissa Lee's essay on Theatre and Intersectionality; Jean Tong's provocation on critical discussion of PoC, Dear White Critics; Blind critic Olivia Muscat's essay on access for Blind and Visually Impaired people; Tom Middleditch's essay on the production of *A Curious Incident* and the representation of Autistic people; Robert Reid's major essay on immersive theatre and Dan Spielman's essay on #MeToo and intimacy protocols in Australian theatre.

16 features were by women, 8 by People of Colour (7 of those by Indigenous authors) and 3 by Disabled writers.

We uploaded an entire Video History of Australian performance by Dr Robert Reid, which covered performance from Indigenous performance pre-settlement to the present day. Much of this history is not easily accessible, even on the internet, or even taught in many of our tertiary institutions.

We also uploaded three series of podcasts: The Witness Interview, an in-depth interview with significant creatives, and The Witness Podcast, in which Witness core staff discussed topical issues. Of the 9 interviews, 8 were with women, 2 with People of Colour and one was with an Indigenous artist (Richard Frankland).

Reviews published March 2018-March 2019

Over the year we published 201 reviews of a total of 232 performances. As the breakdowns show, we covered a wide variety of performance. The largest categories were theatre and dance, which came in at 56% and 17% respectively, but we also covered Live Art, circus, music theatre and musicals, performance for young people and opera.

43% of reviews were of independent companies and 18% from AMPAG. 49% (including main stage, independent and international companies) were reviewed in festivals, ranging from small festivals of indie work such as the Keir Choreographic Awards and Next Wave, to the Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne festivals.

54% of the works we covered were creatively led by women and 14% of the performances reviewed were by People of Colour, of which 6% were Indigenous.

Total performances reviewed 232

Independent companies: 99

AMPAG or commercial companies: 42

Festivals: (Perth, Adelaide & Melbourne Festivals, Adelaide Fringe, Festival of Live Art, MICF, Next Wave, Melbourne Fringe, Live Works, One Night in Footscray, Midsumma, Dance Massive): 114

Genres (NB, some categories overlap)

Theatre 122

Dance 51

Experimental performance 39

Music theatre 15

Works for young people 9

Circus 6

Opera 6

Principle creators (NB some categories overlap)

Works featuring women creators 126

Works featuring LGBTIQ+ creators 28

Works featuring Indigenous creators 15

Works featuring CALD creators 34

Works featuring disabled creators 4

Witness contributors

Total authors 24

Women 16

Men 8

Indigenous 4

CALD 4

LGBTQI 6

Disabled 2

Youth 1

Core Witness creative team: 5

Women 2

Men 3

Indigenous 2

LGBTQI 2

Mentorship programs

In 2018, Witness formally mentored critics through the First Nations Emerging Critics program, for which we appointed Carissa Lee, and a further four new critics through the New Review program that we facilitated for Footscray Community Arts Centre and Malthouse Theatre's Living Now program. Both these programs were extremely successful. Carissa Lee is now an Associate Editor at Witness, and we plan to continue our relationships with the New Review critics. We will appoint a second FNEC in 2019.

We also commissioned reviews and features from a number of writers from marginalised communities outside the mentoring programs, most of whom had not written critically before. This has been a strong feature of our publication schedule, resulting in some excellent work, and we plan to expand in 2019.

Responses from Witness contributors

'Witness has been a wonderful publication to write for. I have not only felt safe in the writing process, but valued. This publication needs to continue so we can extend this experience to others, and inspire other publications to do the same, which it looks like is starting to happen, with various platforms doing call-outs for Indigenous critics. If we are able to continue our work, our unique way of reviewing and commenting on the performing arts in Australia in an honest, unbiased and educated way, it will hopefully improve the way others view performing arts, and inspire others to attend and share them with us.'

- Carissa Lee (2018 First Nations Emerging Critic)

'As a writer, the opportunity to engage in critical dialogue beyond the traditional boundaries of 'the work itself' provided a key and usually absent opportunity for the provision of context, opening up new ways of engaging with theatre. This is particularly important with respect to marginalised communities whose experimentations with form and text are directly connected to their experience of difference. I felt humbled that a publication under criticism for its blind spots was generous and robust enough to counter-publish a criticism of itself, offering both myself and readers the chance to re-evaluate not only the production under scrutiny, but also how implicit biases can worm into what seems like even-handed, 'neutral' critique. The public nature of this engagement offers one example of how, in a time of more 'diverse' works being staged while the bulk of professional reviewing remains curated by more of the same, artists and critics can healthily question norms and open up a more inclusive and vigorous understanding of theatre.'

- Jean Tong (Commissioned features)

'Being part of the Witness New Review program was a great opportunity to develop my writing skills and push my critical thinking. It was exciting to combine my love of live performance with my writing practice and to trust my voice as an audience member. The feedback and editorial guidance I received from Alison was thorough, insightful and helped me look critically at WHY I write and WHAT it is I want to say. I loved reading what fellow New Review critics were writing and seeing performances through their unique lenses. Being mentored by Witness emphasised to me the importance of performance as an art form, but also the necessity of developing an innovative platform to showcase reviews: as a resource for performers, writers and everyone who values the art form.'

- Georgia Mill (Critic, New Review)

'This opportunity gave me invaluable skills that arm me with confidence and specialised performance knowledge to pursue my career goals. The diversity of voices offered through Witness Performance mentoring is a long overdue initiative and one that is desperately needed - to support the aspirations of diverse writers and to address the disparity in public discourse around Diversity in Arts.'

- Monique Grbec (Critic, Yirramboi Blak Critics program)