

Making Time 2023: Imagining the future: where will creativity take us? - Transcript #6

Pavan Kumar Hari and Final Discussion

Wendy Martin: Pavan. Thank you, hello. Let me tell you about Pavan. He's a composer, performer, a dancer and a director who creates music for theatre, film, dance and the concert hall. He began his classical cultural studies here in Perth, in the Indian School of Performing Arts. And he's been performing since the age of three in dance and music productions. He studied composition and percussion at WAAPA, and he's gone on to make an incredible contribution, if any of you have been lucky enough to see the work that he's done in our theatres here in Perth.

He's in the process of setting up his own multi arts company to be called Ascension Arts. And when I was thinking about the name of your company, Ascension Arts, it's a very big ambition and I'd love to hear from you. Pavan is 25. He's about to set up his own company and if you could just share with us a little of what your ambition and goals are.

Pavan Kumar Hari: Hi everyone. So Ascension Arts – it all kind of started during lockdown and kind of like what June was saying, you kind of have to go on your own journey – your own healing journey – before you can heal anyone else. That's what happened for me.

It turned out that it was a realisation that actually I'd been brought up in this culture here, in Australia, in a Western culture, having really strong Indian roots, and not knowing what that meant. And living a life where you practise the traditions, practise the cultures, practised with the community. And inherently it became who you were, but you didn't understand what that actually – well we weren't able to explain it to anyone.

And in lockdown, it gave me an opportunity to understand and question/inquire, just to start inquiring, what does that even mean? Who am I? How am I in this space? What's my identity? And that forced me down – or not really forced me – kind of propelled me down this massive journey of self healing, self awareness.

Spiritual knowledge was at the forefront of all of that. And with all this learning of what my culture had actually taught me, for the first time, I was like, wow, there's a lot of knowledge here, a lot of lessons here that if I had known early on, I could have avoided a lot of suffering, even in this Western culture and in my life.

And in understanding that, my profession had always been in understanding and discovering multidisciplinary arts and intercultural arts, side by side. Because in my culture, music, dancing, and acting or storytelling is all looked at as one art form rather than separate things. And they are there for us to pass down knowledge, ancient knowledge, which, the deeper I went into it, the more I realised that every ancient culture around the world had understood the same truths, and that they had also used

their art forms to explain it in a way that allowed their people, of where they were geographically, where they were historically, where they were, and created stories, in order to teach people how to alleviate suffering from their lives.

And so that also then went, because it's so spiritual, what made me realise about religion, and actually, religion is the exact same principle. And so, coming to this, I was fresh out of uni, I was like, okay, what do I want to do? How do I want to contribute this knowledge to the world and, for me, it was, I realised really quickly that a lot of people didn't want to be healed. A lot of people got angry when you started talking about healing. And it became a case of okay, then, if no one wants to actually be healed, and no one wants to learn these lessons, but they actually, they don't want to have suffering in their life. How can I give that to them?

And then it kind of made sense, oh art. Art was always the way that they did it before because you don't need to be – you could be of any intellectual level, and still experience the emotion in art. And so then the philosophy became something that was intellectualised into something that was experiential.

And so, then the whole kind of basis of creating a company of, okay, how – if I can take this knowledge and this understanding that's in my culture and in every other culture and create a space where, since all the the underlying truths are the same, the only difference is the form of expression. And if art is looked at as something of an expression, if all art is expression, then I can create a platform for people of different cultures. Especially because for me I was born, you know, kind of living in this third space between Indian and Western, and a lot of people are in a third space in their own third bubble. And, for me, I was like, if I can create a space for people who are in that space, who don't really know what their identity is, because they don't fit in one or the other. But to give that, for people to be seen, that's what the whole kind of premise [is].

And so Ascension Arts is this idea of ascension, ascending boundaries, ascending distinctions between you, me, he, him, she, they, it, even pronouns are an easy way of explaining it, because that's just how we look at ourselves as identity, this ego, per se, but to transcend your ego.

So for me, it was my own kind of selfish, spiritual work that I get to do my spiritual work and get paid, at the same time. I was like, fantastic. I mean, what more do I want? But then in doing that I was like, oh, okay, I can give this to other people by just planting a seed. The beautiful thing about art is that everyone perceives it in their own way. And so all my job is, is to plant the seed, whenever that seed is ready to grow in their life. I know I've already done my job, I've shown them the door is there, whenever they're ready to walk through, it's up to them. But I've done a service. I've given love. And seeing that, and seeing that if I am them, that's what I would want, even if I am ignorant, you know, especially if I'm ignorant

Wendy Martin: I think that's something that has happened in Western culture is that culture is separate from everyday life. And we listen to Jack talking about the stories, the song, the dance, the music, that he grew up with. And from birth, you were embedded in this culture.

So what is it that we can learn from this and bring to the practice of the future? I mean, Danielle, you talk about AI, and now it seems something very separate from being human. But in an ideal world, when we have these big issues, and you talk about healing yourself during COVID, I think there were many positives about COVID, because all the issues that we've needed to talk about absolutely came to the surface, whether it was, you know, the awareness of structural inequities and injustices, race and gender, the climate crisis that we're living in, somehow came to the surface, and it's been an opportunity, as you had, personally, to reflect.

Jack - it's so often said that if we listen to Indigenous wisdom and knowledge, we can find some of the answers for the future. And I wonder if you could talk about that a little more in terms of the work that you're doing in advocacy, for listening to first people's knowledge.

Jack Collard: I think as I touched on earlier, it's about living in authenticity. And I think in order to do that, we need to stocktake those impressions, we need to stocktake what we're eating, because we are what we eat. And so when you're talking about AI, and you're talking about these community projects, in my mind, I think about the last 5 months and what I was able to create, with the direction of Kylie Bracknell my djook, and my ngoolja Clint Bracknell, creating new dances for these new Noongar songs to perform on Country.

And throughout this process there was a lot of energy, a lot of good energy. And I drove over here, listening to those songs in the car, channelling all that good energy. And so it's a time of really stocktaking these impressions, understanding how disconnection has affected us. Our disconnection from our food has allowed for the animal abuse and for the disruption of ecosystems around the world. A disconnection from crime and punishment is the reason why we've got all these kids locked up in prison. This disconnection from the economy, how we got these four walls where we're, you know, we're living in Midland right now you go down South, you go up North, that's where all us Noongars, we were pushed out, out of sight, out of mind. And us Noongars weren't the first things that were pushed out of sight, out of mind.

And what COVID allowed us to reflect on is that all this "out of sight out of mind" comes back to bite us eventually. So now we're at a time where our generation is ready for this healing. We're ready to have these conversations and to completely restructure the way in which we exist. How much energy we put into the adornments we wear. What's the energy that I put into this compared to that fella in that sweatshop. We are what we eat. And we really need to figure out our diet, so that our kids eat what they need to eat, so they become what they need to become, for the chaos to come

Wendy Martin: Thank you, Jack. It's interesting, we don't have any 16 year olds here today, but I was talking yesterday to the mothers of a 14 year old and a 15 year old. And I think Danielle, you touched on this, and also Neda, in terms of social media and the digital world, kids feel disconnected. There's so much anger out there, there's so much competitiveness.

But somehow, what you said, Danielle, is the storytelling -- the process -- brings us back to that. So as an educator, what does the future need to look like within schools? How do we deal with the impacts, the negative impacts of the digital world on our young people? And how do we support them through art?

It's big question. But it's right there on the surface. I think. There's a lot of pain.

Danielle Antaki: Yeah, that's a massive question. I mean, I guess what I was sort of talking about in my speech is a bit revolutionary, but I do really believe it. I think that community arts -- because we won't, you know, AI's will be able to create whatever it is that gets spooned to us. So the consumption part of it will be potentially taken care of. I think the real work will be working with communities, working with people with face-to-face work, and I'm not saying that there's not a place for that as well. It could be another string to the bow, but I feel like the value of real human experiences will -- I mean, look, I'm being hopeful too. This is my hope. This is my dream. This is, I guess, my idealistic projection into the future.

But I do believe that it's these sorts of symposiums, it's these sorts of conversations that need to be had. And I completely agree with June as well, that, you know, there's a sense that, oh it's just pushed to the side, it's the poor cousin of real art. And my argument is that what we are doing will actually be the real art of the future.

I think it's very telling also, that the Revive Policy focuses on that, because I think there's a realisation that well, what is art? What is consumption? What are we watching on our televisions? What are we, you know, it's just like drivel. Right? But what is it that we really need? What is it that we really need as a community?

We need to be talking to each other. We need to be interpreting our feelings, our experiences, through a medium that creates more meaning -- that opens up a universe of possible meanings, that shares that together, you know. And that is what art does.

And I don't know if we want to keep calling it community art, because maybe it's not the right title? Maybe it is "art". Maybe we just stop calling it community art. We just call it art. This is the real art. This is what we're doing. What you're doing, over there, is fabricated, it's somebody's - one person's idea, going off in a tangent and creating something. But what we're doing is the real art. It's working with humans, with communities, creating culture, creating meaning.

And I think that's what's really fascinating and so full of hope for me. Because I think that's where we should be, that's the conversation we should be having around what we are doing. And what this work is all about. It shouldn't be the poor cousin. It should be -- this is the important stuff.

And I feel like it's starting to shift. And I think it's -- I have read the Revive Policy, and it's really, really fascinating. I think the crux of it is slowly gearing into that direction, but it's having more conversations like this -- getting the right people at the table to talk about this. And making the case for this work being more important, I think, absolutely more important.

And audiences who come and see it feel that too. They know it's more important because it's real. It's genuine. It's based in real experiences, and real stories that, you know, that are universal, but are human and shared and communal and social and all that stuff. I could keep going on. I don't know actually, if I answered your question even.

Wendy Martin: It's a wonderful summation of what we've been talking about. I see Michelle is up at the microphone again, we're running out of time.

Michelle White: It's because I don't know how to play an instrument [audience laughs]. I might start singing though if you keep going. No I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Wendy Martin: We're being stopped. Let's say thank you to the panel. Jack, Danielle, Neda and Pavan. Thank you.