

CURRENCY PRESS FESTIVAL OF PLAYWRIGHTS 2025
KEYNOTE: WHAT IS AN AUSTRALIAN PLAY? GIVEN BY JORDAN SHEA

I begin with an excerpt of a poem, written by Dr. Deborah Ruiz Wall, OAM, an academic whose research has long embodied relationship between the early Filipino settlers in Australia and First Nations people. With grace and gratitude, Deb has given me permission to use this poem:

Imagining rainbow voices
under the guava tree in San Andres
at the back of my parents' timber home,
I picture my characters enlivened
by many tongues — a make-believe world
from a child's inner eye.

Outside, the open wild tropical field beckoned
and I ran carefree chasing dragonflies.
With my thumb and forefinger, I caught the fragile wings
of one then let it fly with my spirit to the unknown.
Many decades later, I looked up to
the blackest of sky glittering with diamonds
across the wide turquoise sea of the Kimberleys.
With two Aboriginal women elders,
I watched speechless and in awe.

That glorious moment, time stopped —
a pause after a camping trip on the night
when I was introduced to Country,
a pristine red pindan landscape
full of natural artefacts of speaking rocks
and ancient burial sacred sites of flint tools
and ancestors. Li-yan, the locals call the intimate link
after being summoned by the land

and blessed for protection: no crocodiles
nor sharks dare harm the visitor.

My surprise 'Welcome to Country' emerged
when a giant swordfish got entangled
in my bait, and I was made to realize
that I am on a bridge between worlds
of a fast, crazy wound-up economic machine,
an age of unbelief, and an unseen paradise waiting
to be unveiled.

For me, Deb's poem moves between places and voices. Combining Filipino urban living and Aboriginal custodianship. Sweeping the landscapes of the bustling streets of San Andres and the dramatic gorges of the Kimberleys. All held together in one thread. It's a reminder of how theatre works in this country. It isn't neat, it isn't one story. It's layered. It listens. It connects.

White History dictates that English language theatre began in 1796 with convicts performing scripts on Bligh Street. But really, theatre has been here for tens of thousands of years, sung and danced into Country. First Nations storytelling isn't an introduction to the Australian play.

It *is* the Australian play. The oldest continuing one. Everything else we have written is in conversation with that fact.

Deb's poem is not just a beautiful piece of writing; it is a lens through which we can begin to understand what an Australian play can aspire to. An Australian play can be a bridge between different histories, cultures, and experiences. It allows us to step into worlds that are both intensely personal and deeply connected to collective memory. The Australian play is never neutral. It carries the weight of history, identity, and cultural conversation, while still finding room for imagination, play, and discovery.

My name is Jordan Shea. I am a writer, a Filipino-Australian, a VCA graduate, a high school English teacher, and an actor, who returned to the stage after a decade's hiatus, in *The*

Producers at the Hayes Theatre, playing an unhinged playwright with extremist views. What a stretch. And this year, I am the keynote speaker – tasked with understanding the question – *What is an Australian play?*

We all walk into the theatre carrying more than titles. We carry our communities, our cultures, our histories. For many of us it's a push and pull, as we toil with this fabulous art form. Walking into theatres and wondering whether we belong, whether our stories belong. Maybe an Australian play is exactly that: a constant balancing act between belonging and not belonging, between being heard and not being heard.

The question: *What is an Australian play?* dwarfs me, sitting in my study as I spin a lazy susan of projects that I have the privilege to wake up to. To pick and choose from, safely. Free from fatal conflict, free from danger. At the same desk, I've sat, like so many of us, equipped with our imagination, an article, an anecdote told by someone close to us, a secret history or a public one. Hoping that we come up with the goods to contribute our unique voice, ourselves, our stories and our peoples' stories. We hope that what we come up with will be read, considered, programmed, published, revived, toured. All the dreams that we rightfully choose to have.

And here's the truth: sometimes getting a play on in Australia can feel almost impossible. Not just the writing. The getting it funded, produced, believed in. Every Australian play you've ever seen has a hidden backstory about who fought for it: the producer who went through a dozen grant rejections, the actors who rehearsed for free, the company that took a risk. That's part of what makes these works uniquely ours: the sheer effort, frustration and persistence it takes to bring them into being.

On Sunday, I fly up to the final creative development of my work at Queensland Theatre: *Malacañang Made Us*. The play covers a family of three navigating thirty-six years of revolution. It spans Manila, Brisbane, and the digital world. When the work won the Queensland Premier's Drama Award, it was described, by the company, not by me, as a 'watershed moment for Australian theatre'. That word, 'watershed' is flattering. If my play is watershed, then a drought came before it. And that drought tells us something about how narrow our idea of an 'Australian play' has been. What other watersheds are overdue? Whose stories are still waiting their turn?

As playwrights, we rarely get the chance to sit, reflect or even consider the meteor shower of work that undoubtedly collided into our own orbits while we were or are, forming our practice. It is so easy to consider the classics. Chekhov, Hansberry, Shakespeare, Kane, Churchill, Wilson, Williams, O'Neill, and more. All of them are worth celebrating, but none of them are responsible for the construction of an Australian play.

The works that landed in the DNA of my craft have been condensed for the purpose of today's keynote. It's a whole other speech to celebrate the longlist of Australian plays that could answer the keynote question. But for the purpose of a free feed in the foyer, tonight's works I'll remember were penned by Ursula Yovich, Stefo Nantsou, S. Shakthidharan and Champion Decent.

My own understanding of an Australian play began just over that body of water. Stefo Nantsou and Tom Lycos, of Zeal Theatre, had received a residency at Sydney Theatre Company. Zeal was passionate about theatre in education and was revolutionary in making confronting issues palatable to school audiences. The play I saw, in the dying months of the Howard era circa 2007, was called *Australia versus South Africa*. Written by Stefo and Tom, the work made my friends and I understand the power and purpose of racial tensions. I still remember the pre-show dialogue peppered in as both Stefo and Tom searched the bags of the student audience, playing security guards at a rugby match. I was hooked.

Seven years later, I was a young undergraduate theatre student who snagged a ticket to a performance of Champion Decent's *Unholy Ghosts*. The play captured the struggle of a queer playwright juggling his own career with that of caring for his divorced, unsupportive and ageing parents. Knowing virtually nothing of the play before I saw it, it was a masterclass in understanding that an Australian play could easily be used as a vessel for insight into worlds so far from our own.

In 2019, on January 26, I saw an extraordinary collaboration between Legs on the Wall, Performing Lines and Burarra playwright Ursula Yovich. The *Man with the Iron Neck* alerted me to this country's colonial complicity toward the deaths of our most vulnerable – young people living in remote communities. As truthful and confronting as it was for no doubt most of the audience who still struggle with the idea of our past, it was made clearer through a multi-disciplinary Australian play. The play seamlessly weaved Ursula's words, with the

compelling practice of physical theatre and aerial performance. I walked away realising that an Australian play could make every effort to ditch its stand and deliver style and embrace a decolonial style to teach us about what matters.

And finally, when Shakthi's *Counting and Cracking* arrived to its deserved acclaim, the play was no doubt directly responsible for a wave of Asian voices that came through in the preceding years, including my own. *Counting and Cracking* was the play that told me if you are to write your history in this country, be bold, be ambitious. Engage with the right actors and creatives to bring your story to life as authentically as possible. Leave no stone unturned in the way of being as daring as you possibly can.

This shift in these four extremely different Australian plays, shows us how dynamic and responsive Australian theatre has become. Playwrights have no longer been interpreting what is 'traditionally' Australian; they are expanding that definition. It can be experimental, hybrid, deeply personal, and socially conscious. It is reflective of the diverse population that exists here and the histories that are often overlooked.

From our unique domestic situations and voices, embodied by two cane cutters in suburban Melbourne, in Ray Lawler's quintessential: *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. To our First Nations narratives that go hand in hand with educating Australia on issues so pressing, so powerfully seen in Jack Davis' *No Sugar*, Jane Harrison's *Stolen*, Nakkiah Lui's *Black is the New White* and Leah Purcell's *The Drover's Wife*. These titles, and many more, have heralded the arrival of the works of Dylan Van Den Berg, Thomas Weatherall, Amy Sole, Dalara Williams, Megan Wilding and many more.

Then, the plays that brought searing social complexities to light, often with the right amount of unsettling humour and palpable darkness. David Williamson's *The Removalists*, Alana Valentine's *Parramatta Girls*, Oriel Grey's *The Torrents*, Nick Enright's *Black Rock*, Angus Cerini's *The Bleeding Tree*, Emmanuelle Mattana's *Trophy Boys*, and Patricia Cornelius' *Slut*. There are the plays that have given the LGBTQIA+ community the platform they have fought so tirelessly toward. I think of Tommy Murphy's *Holding the Man*, Glace Chase's *Triple X*, Lachlan Philpott's *Lost Boys* and Maeve Marsden's *Blessed Union*. There have been the voices that have crafted the hostilities of our climate and surrounding environment: Chris Bendall's *Black Sun/Blood Moon* and Noëlle Janaczewska's *The End of Winter*.

We've seen works that have sought to capture the multi-dimensional experiences of the disabled: Ryan Enniss' *Drizzle Boy*, and Performing Lines' *Glass Child*, created by Kyah and Matrayah Gunther, Kate Harman and Gavin Webber. In more recent years, our stages have seen works that have exemplified our relationship with Asia, in so many different ways: Vanessa Bates' *The One*, Anchuli Felicia King's *White Pearl*, Merlynn Tong's *Golden Blood* and Michelle Law's *Miss Peony*, to name a few.

And now, I look around and see young playwrights who are unafraid to start with themselves. Their families, their romances, their struggles with identity or mental health. Once, those might have been dismissed as 'too small'. But now they're recognised as universal. Because the more specific and truthful you are, the more people see themselves in it.

So, there we have it.

Glorious.

Exciting.

Stirring.

Problem solved.

The Australian play is not static; it changes with its people. Its form, style, and subjects shift with social consciousness, and the ongoing dialogue between our past and our present. The Australian play is a living record of who we are and who we aspire to be.

It is so easy to continue to wax lyrical about the Australian plays that have meant something to us. Whether it's Patricia Cornelius' relentless interrogation of class, Alana Valentine's die-hard quest to get the unseen and unheard firmly in our ears and eyes, or Andrea James' First Nations perspective on historical series of events that would otherwise lurk untold or deeply archived. There are catalogues of the Australian play, many created by people in this very room. Whether they've been performed to thousands nationally or internationally, or by your four mates in your share house. I don't miss those days. Or whether they've lived on in our hard drives, or on scraps of paper littered around wherever we chose to craft.

But the truth is, if I look forward to what an Australian play is, to many people outside our safe and cosseted bubble, the Australian play is easily seen as a risk.

Often, new Australian plays explore territory that is uncomfortable, untested, and necessary. And because of this, they require support, patience, and belief from both audiences and institutions. Risk is intrinsic to innovation.

Where does the Australian play lie now?

In late 2019, early 2020, I was awarded the last Philip Parsons co-fellowship at Belvoir, alongside five great writers. The goal was to generate new Australian plays, and we did. Our plays were passionate and strived to correlate with Belvoir's deep-rooted ethos and history. But when COVID-19 hit, there is very little doubt that the value of a new Australian play, was put on the chopping block across the country. It became clear that the resilience of our sector depends on investing in playwrights and their developmental processes, even in uncertain times.

Five years on, to the uncommissioned or unprogrammed, the Australian play that gains traction appears to be adaptation. Or one-person shows. Many of these performed to critical and commercial acclaim. Even overseas. As they should be. There's no doubt that a playwright in this country has to re-jig their way of thinking if they are to create an Australian play that will be commissioned or programmed. And they should, if, according to a joint study by Creative Australia, Macquarie University and the Copyright agency, a writer earns just over eighteen thousand dollars on average, in a financial year solely from creative output.

But, it isn't all doom and gloom.

When I crunched the numbers on ten of our mainstage theatre companies, fifty-six Australian works were programmed this year. Most companies had over fifty percent of Australian works in their season, and while that should be recognised, it is interesting to note that of these fifty-six shows, twenty-nine of them are adaptations or remounts. This does lead me to question where original thought and original narratives exist within our ecosystems. Where do our next generation stand in what they want to write? But importantly, what are their realistic chances of being launched onto our stages? This brings

me to the fact that out of the fifty-six Australian plays taking the stage, only five of the writers of these plays are making their mainstage debut.

I'm one of them.

The pipeline for new voices must be strengthened. The Australian play is changing not just in content but in opportunity. If we want new stories to emerge, they must be given time, mentorship, and resources. I'm not saying that everyone programmed in the coming decade should be under thirty. I'm saying that our next generation of playwrights require a clearer pipeline to have their work developed and known to companies.

Support structures shape the future of the Australian play. Emerging writers need access to dramaturgy, workshops, residencies, and independent venues. They need encouragement to experiment and take risks. This ensures that the Australian play continues to evolve, reflecting new realities and diverse perspectives.

What is an Australian play?

It's one that connects two vital elements: Investment and Creative Development.

It's great to get our plays up, but they must be ready.

Investment and development go hand in hand. A play can only achieve its full potential if writers are given the tools, the time, and the guidance to refine their craft. This is not indulgence. It is the foundation of quality, longevity, and impact.

The Australian play costs money, as it should. The investment in the incubation of these works is crucial to legitimising a healthy development culture across our theatre landscape. It's great to see that Melbourne Theatre Company will premiere five original Australian plays this year, sparked by an initial 4.6 million dollar investment into Australian work in 2017. The NEXT STAGE writers' program has not only invested in the careers, and practice of writers, but it has ensured a solid amount of Australian plays will be rolled out in the future. I am extremely fortunate to have been a beneficiary of this program. The generosity of this funding leads me to believe that rather than companies being in an endless grant cycle, where they must battle the corporate jargon in order to fund projects, philanthropists should lead the way in keeping playwrights afloat.

But what if you're not a beneficiary from a program like that one? What if you're green? What if you're living an hour away from a subsidised theatre? Or if you can't afford one of our two postgraduate courses in writing for performance, one which costs over forty thousand dollars. But still, you feel the almighty pull to put finger to keyboard, pen to paper, and get a story out? What do you do? I have taught many of these playwrights, at Shopfront Arts Co-op in Carlton, Belvoir and at open programs at KXT. It is clear to me they have passion for storytelling. Many of them are using their personal experience and stories as their debuts. This is risky and admirable and can easily equip them with big dreams. Today, Fringe, tomorrow, first look deal with Netflix. This has led me to think that the mindset of developing a work should focus on craft rather than getting it show-ready. It is hard, when so many of our next generation gravitate toward the idea of immediate success, rather than the slow burn of developing one's practice.

Emerging playwrights carry enormous energy and creativity. The challenge is ensuring that energy is supported, guided, and allowed to mature without being stifled by financial or logistical barriers.

Playwriting development, specifically outside of a subsidised company, is one that is reliant on the writer. External development pipelines, away from the major companies, is urgently needed to provide the time, resources, mentorship and remuneration for playwrights of all experience levels to consistently develop their work. When Australian Plays Transform, our national playwriting development body, lost their multi-year funding in 2018, this idea of investing in a playwright, developing their work and even dangling that elusive title of 'career', quickly disintegrated. The pot of money required to sufficiently fund solid blocks of development, has meant detrimental cuts to the dramaturgical process of the Australian play. The respect for the time and investment needed became quickly non-existent, and a burgeoning small to medium sector became a playground for imagination and ideas.

A playwright's debut work will almost exclusively happen in the independent sector due to these cuts. In Sydney, two of our remaining independent venues: KXT and the Old Fitz, are fast establishing themselves as the hotbed for new narratives. In KXT's case, government funding is non-existent to provide time or personnel for top line dramaturgy for new work. While the indie sector is in a strong position to deliver free space to first-time and early-career playwrights, there is no government funding being delivered to a venue like KXT for

play development. Many of our independent producers and artists are spending hours on funding applications, advocating for a playwright's passion project. But in that advocacy, saying that a playwright has a great and unique voice is not enough, it must now hit targets, KPIs and engage with members of the community. So, rather than the ideal of 'art for art's sake', funding for new Australian work must be justified via other parameters, inevitably reducing the funds available for investing in rigorous artistic development.

How extraordinary would it be if there was a realistic amount of funding to pair up our most emerging writers with some of the finest theatre-minds this country has to offer. It would meld a generation of playwrights, and perhaps, seek to answer the question that this keynote poses. I like to believe there is no such thing as 'the old guard' or 'the new guard', there are generations of playwrights that would benefit off each other tenfold. Mentorship, sustained development, and intergenerational collaboration are central to shaping the future of Australian theatre. These ideas ensure the craft is honed, the stories are authentic, and the voices are empowered.

If we care about what an Australian play is, we begin to understand that an Australian play holds a degree of power, to go beyond the walls of a theatre, to enter into the public consciousness, even to land squarely and firmly on our school syllabus. The Australian play is a cultural touchstone. It teaches empathy, challenges assumptions, and affirms identities. Its influence extends beyond performance—it shapes conversation, education, and social awareness. An Australian play is not a gamble, but a responsibility. It rewards audiences by expanding their horizons and affirming the value of our stories.

If it is our collective responsibility to create an Australian play, it is the powers that be across so-called Australia that hold the responsibility to support it, to get it in front of an audience, particularly those that need to see themselves and their communities on stage. An Australian play will have a longer life, if we are to champion its writer's voice, to keep their emails answered, their ideas listened to and their possibilities open.

An Australian play should not remain an idea, held by creative nerves and funding anxiety, it should be a clear reality. It should be original, unheard, unseen – and because of these reasons should be heard and seen. It excites me what the future holds, as we fight to capture stories that are relevant, authentic and dare I say, profitable.

Playwriting is an artform, it is a craft. Something we all know.

Truthfully, I have no fixed answer to what an Australian play is.

All I know is through my own reflection and research, it is one that seems different year to year, undeniably changing, fighting to keep up with whatever zeitgeist rears its head. It is one that is being written or dreamt up by identities that are being embraced, by voices that have long remained silenced, or by our veterans who still have extraordinarily important commentary to offer.

At this very moment, or even in the coming hours, an Australian play is coming to the forefront of our most emerging, our emerged and our most established.

Let's keep doing it then, yeah?

Thank you.

Jordan Shea, 22 August 2025