

ArtState Wagga Wagga speech – Rafael Bonachela

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to pay my respects to the Wiradjuri people, the custodians of this beautiful country that we are all gathered on and to honour the elders past and present and the future custodians.

I also want to acknowledge and pay my respects to other first nations peoples here with us today – we are all richer from the knowledge you bring and share. Thanks also to Eastern Riverina Arts, Regional Arts NSW, the City of Wagga Wagga, and Create NSW and the NSW Government for bringing us together.

This morning is going to be a little road trip. So many of us have arrived here via road, instead of the usual flying, a little more time taken, a different path. The same end point but a little changed by the journey – a lot like 2020 all over really.

Before I get into the “keynote” part of this morning I thought I would just take a moment to tell you a little bit about myself. At first glance there might not seem to be a huge link between a Spanish-born choreographer, running a city-based dance company and regional arts in NSW. In fact, I was born in a small town called La Garriga which is 40kms outside of Barcelona. That might not sound like very far away from a major international city, but it was very much like a country town.

As a boy I always liked dancing but my only exposure to it was on TV – my references were Michael Jackson, Fame and of course, old black and white movies. Watching Fame made me realise that it was possible to actually, become a dancer, that you could actually, go to a school and learn to be a one – I wanted to be Leroy. I used to make dances in the school playground but did not have any lessons, there was no dance school (I’m talking about the 70s and 80s, so we are talking pre-billy Elliott days). I am told now there are 3 so there has been some progress.

My parents worked long hours and it was not possible for them to take me to the city for lessons, so I only started to go when I was 15 years old and could take the train by myself. And I was really lucky to have a great teacher who helped me get a scholarship so I could do class every day and then after a couple of years encouraged me to audition for a company called Lanònima Imperial. She just told me there was an audition and I should go. I had still never seen any performances of contemporary dance, but I actually got the job at age 17.

Within a year of working with this company I realised that contemporary dance was what I wanted to do. And I knew that I needed to spread my wings, so my mother went to the mayor of La Garriga and she was able to get the town council to pay for the flights, the state government provided a stipend for my living expenses and I received a scholarship to study dance at the London Studio Centre.

So, I arrived in London, age 18 with a dream! I could read English as we had studied it in school but had never actually spoken it. I spent the next 20 years in London, dancing and pursuing my dream to be a choreographer. That childhood game of let’s make a dance never left me. The help I received along the way, the encouragement from my family and community, the belief in me even when I didn’t know what I might be capable of each moment of support, I think Joel and Marcus framed it yesterday as “decluttering the pathway”, each step was important. As it is for every artist.

So, we can fast forward quite a few years from here and pick up the story in 2008 when I was invited to make a work for Sydney Dance Company. I came to Australia to make one work, and I think it was really the longest job interview in the world. Three months later I was offered the position of Artistic Director. I knew that my earliest experiences would always live with me and I was drawn to the

possibilities of this company that already toured so much and the exposure that I knew this would bring to kids in country towns, exposure I never had but had so desperately wished for.

The first tour we did after I took over included my first visit to Wagga and the touring program has continued to grow from strength to strength. About 8 years ago we were able to initiate a touring education program and deliver workshops alongside our performances and in that time. I have seen young dancers travel the trajectory of being a kid in a small town (one from Cootamundra to be precise) to doing a workshop with us, to coming to train with us to then having a job in the company as a professional dancer and onwards to international careers.

So that is a little bit of background for you about how I personally connect to this incredible space, this network of people and places that we call regional arts. And really this whole talk today could just be called personal connection. It is the thread that continues to inspire and drive me, and all of us really, especially through this year.

So, before we begin, how are you all? Whoa what a year huh. The ultimate disruption.

March 2020, we were in the theatre doing tech rehearsals, days away from the world premiere of my new work *Impermanence* – if that's not a prescient title I don't know what is. As the world started shutting down and the news got worse and worse, we could see that things were going to get rough. We tried to hang on, to get as much work done as we could. Looking back, it seems crazy now, but we wanted to have the tech work done so that once the theatres reopened we would be ready to go – I don't think we really thought it would take so long.

We had a company meeting to talk through what was upon us and everyone went home in a state of growing shock. My own anxiety was pretty heightened at this time as my brother was in hospital in Barcelona with COVID-19 and the news out of Spain was truly frightening. But here we were, the theatres were shut, the studios were closed, and we had a company of artists with that rare thing, a full-time job, and we didn't want to let them down.

COVID-19 brought us this traumatic moment in time a global shut down and our industry brought to its knees. We all have a biological stress response to trauma, a fight or flight, and for Sydney Dance Company we had a collective fight response. Maybe it's just that dance is well known for its stress relieving, cortisol lowering, mental health benefits. But one way or another we were going to find a way through this.

Work had already begun on creating the virtual studio. Sydney Dance Company had first identified moving the classes to online as a risk mitigant in theory in late February and we started putting it into practice in mid-March, about a week before we were forced to close the studios.

We needed to retain revenue sources, we needed to keep our people employed and we needed to find a way to stay sane. How to plan the unplannable and solve the unsolvable. Things were moving so fast that we were already saying "that was so 20 minutes ago".

Like all businesses, this felt like a catastrophic moment and for the arts I think it will leave a fundamentally changed landscape. I have never been uncomfortable with the notion that art and business are mutually exclusive. I have comfortably moved between the commercial end of the business choreographing for Kylie and Tina Turner through to the high art of working with the Paris Opera Ballet.

So, the challenge in front of us all at that moment was how to keep the business afloat so that we could make art in the future so that artists would continue to have jobs. All hands-on deck went towards creating the online classes and #sdckkeepdancing and our virtual studios were born. The dancers were redeployed to teach classes. Our tech crew became virtual customer service people, we did a crash course in this new thing called Zoom, we pulled together the worlds quickest marketing campaign and

we launched. We held our breath. Would our customers move from studio to online with us? Would they pay for online classes? Could we continue to connect to our audiences and community?

We have had over 65 thousand attendances to our virtual classes, and currently between our virtual classes and our face-to-face classes we are delivering 120 classes per week! There's no excuse people, get dancing, there is a class that's right for you!

I have to share these this you. I don't think we realised what would come, the virtual classes program has won a Time Out award for favourite way to get moving from home and also, importantly given on going employment to the fulltime dancer ensemble and 23 casual dance teachers at a time, when all of their other work dried up. Many of them were able to access JobKeeper through us and I have to say without JobKeeper things would look very different right now.

Once we had the virtual studio up and running, we turned our attention to converting our training and education programs to a virtual offering as well. We moved our schools' program online and have so far reached over 1,500 students across Australia, most of them in regional centres as we focused our attention on those that really were the most isolated.

It hasn't all been 'wine and roses'. Everyone in the company has been on reduced hours and pay since April and the stress has been incredible at times, for all of us. The dancers initially kept fit from home with remote Zoom class and rehearsals and there has been a huge amount of uncertainty. But we have at all times chosen to keep moving.

Personally, I am someone who never gives up and so we kept pushing. I am most of all an artist, my first response to this crisis was to work closely with our Executive Director Anne Dunn to find pathways and solutions, but I also knew that we needed an artistic response.

And then, *Cuatro* was conceived. *Cuatro* is four in Spanish. 1 person per four square metres. This was originally conceived when each of us had our four walls closing in on us. *Cuatro*, 4 short films, 4 dancers, 4 musicians created and shot in isolation. A collaboration with the Sydney Symphony. These incredible artists have not yet met in person. We devised the project online, they rehearsed online, and they were all filmed and recorded separately in Sydney Dance Company's studios. The studios were closed to the public still and we filmed only once the initial hard lockdown eased slightly. There was never more than three people in a huge studio – the film maker, me and the dancer or the musician.

As artists, to respond to this world in which we find ourselves is our reason for being. To have the opportunity to express ourselves, to reflect how you feel, how we feel, how the world is feeling, is our reason for being. *Cuatro* has had a reach of over 200,000 views since it was launched in early June and it felt important to actually create a thing of beauty and give it to the world at this time. For Sydney Dance Company it is a moment of dwelling in first principles amidst the chaos. We are a company that first and foremost creates new work and this pathway felt like a better response for us than streaming archives. Plus, those retrospective rights negotiations were a nightmare.

I am always someone who thrives on collaboration and social distance and lockdown was not going to stop me. As we slowly emerged from lockdown the theatres were still closed but we had the dancers back in the studio – film was our friend we had begun a conversation with the Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Environment about their focus on public spaces and the role the arts could play in activating public spaces. They were planning the first Festival of Place and we were invited to be a part of it. During lockdown we were all out and about in our parks and walking tracks and it seemed a natural step to take art to those parks as well.

With the department's support we created a series of 4 short films of dance in incredible public spaces. Around greater Sydney, we shot at dawn on Maroubra Beach headland and out in Western Sydney parklands, and then filmed in the city and in the Olympic Park. We were completely COVID-safe, the dancers don't touch, and we had our COVID Marshall with us everywhere. A whole new industry is

developing there. We became our own outdoor film production company. Our tech team pushed a gear trolley, our programming team became film producers, and the dancers were so happy to be creating and it was all hands-on deck on the shoestring budget.

As we were shooting these, I heard the story that we heard from Uncle Stan Grant on Thursday about the true meaning of Wagga being a place of dance and celebration, not a place of many crows. Ash Hunter from the Department of Planning set up for me to have a yarn to Jonathan Jones about it, he shared the story in more detail, and it was so inspiring as a dance maker to think about this place where dance and ceremony has been central for thousands of years and that the true spirit of a place was gaining recognition. We wanted to contribute to that recognition, to spread that knowledge of the centrality of dance to this place.

We came to Wagga and sat down with Aunty Isabel Reed and told her my ideas. Uncle Pete Ingram, who did the smoking ceremony for us on Thursday, took us to the incredible dance grounds near the river. For two days we prepared the space and talked. It's raining, we are pulling weeds out and wondering if the sun will ever come out so we can film. Pete built a fire and Aunty Isabel came and welcomed us to this beautiful country we were immersed in the smoke of this place. It was incredible.

Jonathan had told me this beautiful phrase that Uncle Stan had said and it stuck in my mind. "A good dancer is the dancer that kicks the dust up and really breathes in the country". As Aunty Isabel came out from under the tree to speak and welcome us, the rain stopped and the sun broke through the clouds. We filmed the male solo dance in one magical shot. I am getting goosebumps thinking about it.

So, I am going to share that film with you now. It is 10 minutes long. But remember I am an artist not a talker. Dance is always better when you watch it rather than talk about it.

Dance Locale Wagga Wagga link: <https://youtu.be/0YfblxGbgQU>

I won't take too much more of your time today, but I guess I want to finish on the theme of the day "shaping tomorrow". Over this very strange year I have been inspired by the drive of artists to keep creating, regardless of the circumstances. It's in our DNA and even in isolation my most rewarding experiences have come from collaboration with other artists. So, continue to find ways to help that happen, to facilitate those conversations and keep connecting. That is the way we will all continue to find the silver linings of these massive shifts in our industry and find strength for the future.