Ep8: Reimagining the future of theatre and live performance
Jesse Cameron Alick in Conversation with Adrian Ellis

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Adrian Ellis: Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life.

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I'm Adrian Ellis, Chair of GCDN, and today I'm talking to Jesse Cameron Alick about a report commissioned by the Sundance Institute and just published, called, Emerging from the Cave. It's an analysis of the ecology of the performing arts based on interviews with 70 odd artists, creatives, arts administrators, and thought leaders in the cultural sector. It's an important report, and as we talk our way through the main analysis and the principal recommendations, I think you'll agree. After my conversation with Jesse, I'll be joined by Criena Gehrke for our usual key takeaway segment. So stay tuned.

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Adrian Ellis: Jesse Cameron Alick is a producer, a poet, a playwright, an essayist, and a science fiction expert. But none of those reasons are directly why he's here today. He's here today because he's the author of a report commissioned by the Sundance Institute, called, Emerging from the Cave: Reimagining Our Future in Theatre and Live Performance.

I think it's an important report and I'm going to ask Jesse to talk us through it, its origins and its implications. But before I do that, Jesse, I usually like to ask our guests a little bit about themselves.

Jesse Cameron Alick: Absolutely.

Adrian Ellis: I described all those things that you are, but I missed one word out of that, which was dramaturg. And I'm guessing that when you were young, you didn't say to your mum, I want to be a dramaturg when I grow up.

Jesse Cameron Alick: (laughs)

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Adrian Ellis: So I'm fascinated to know a little bit more about your professional path to your current position as the dramaturg and the Associate Artistic Director of the Vineyard Theatre in New York.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Absolutely. Well, Adrian, thank you for chatting with me today. And thank you for reading the study. Also, it was such a labour of love but um, to go way back in time, let's see. I'm originally from Montana, which is, you know, in the Western United States, high in the Rocky Mountains. And, um, there's nobody in Montana really, and there's not too much theatre to speak of there.

Despite that I grew up in an arts family and a lot of my relatives are actors or writers or novelists or poets or musicians. And so I did grow up sort of surrounded by the arts and I decided that I wanted to be in the theatre. And so I moved to New York City at age 17 without a plan.

Um, this was way back in 1999. And I got to New York City, and the first thing that I did was that I started to go to small theatres and knock on their doors and see if they would give me a job. And I got to one theatre and I remember very clearly that I spoke to the person in charge.

I was like, Hey, you know, can I get a job here? And the woman, the production manager was like, well, we have an opening for a spotlight operator. Um, and she was like, have you ever operated a spotlight? And that was 17. So of course I haven't. Um, and I said, no, but if you give me a chance, I won't mess up. And that could be the headline for my entire career: If you give me a chance, I won't mess this up.

Um, I'm a non-college person, it's worth saying. So I didn't go to college and I don't have that sort of background. But from there I just started saying yes to every single job that was offered me. I've worked at, let's see, a box office manager, a theatre manager who manages rental spaces.

I joined the small theatre company, Subjective Theatre Company when I was 19. Um, and I started writing plays when I was around 20 and became their resident playwright. And they produced, I think my, my first stuff, four or five plays. And then I started producing plays with that theatre company and really sort of immersed myself in the independent theatre scene in New York city, um, until I was about 25. And I became the artistic director and the main producer of that theatre company.

And then when I was 25, I, I heard of an opportunity at The Public Theater in New York City. And I went there and I interviewed for a job as the assistant to the artistic director there. And I got that job. And from then on, I just kept on saying yes. I think all through my twenties, I'd probably work about five, or five or six jobs at the same time. Like the good West Indian boy that I am. And essentially, you know, I learned dramaturgy at The Public Theater.

I've started, started to learn what dramaturgy was and brought it back to my independent theatre company and started to use the sort of art of dramaturgy. And from then I got promotion after promotion at The Public Theater – from the assistant to the artistic director to artistic associate, then I was literary manager and then company dramaturg.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: So all in all, I was there for 15 years. And then I would say at the same time, you know, I just – I did what any good theatre person would do, which is I just built relationships with people and started chatting with people about their sort of work. And as I did that, I got a lot of freelance gigs at, uh, various other theatres, dramaturgy projects or producing projects for other theatres. And that's where, um, my relationship with Sundance started also. I was, I've been a dramaturg, a freelance dramaturg with Sundance over the last three or four years, and really built the deep relationship with their theatre programme over there.

So in a nutshell, that's sort of like, you know, like how I built my career. I will say not going to college really made my career a slow stepping career, and meant that every job was built on every job, every relationship was built on every relationship. And that's certainly how I sort of look at my career.

Reputation is really important to me. I believe in reputation, I believe in gossip also, I think the gossip is the light of the universe. And um, in the theatre, in live performances especially, that's how we get things done – through our relationships with each other.

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Adrian Ellis: How fascinating. So you've seen theatre at least, live performance in general and theatre from pretty well every angle it sounds like, over the course of your career. So, is this your first venture into policy analysis? Because if so, I'm about to flatter you greatly on it because I, I think it's not just an interesting report, but very well structured report.

So, just tell me a bit about that last step from your relationship with Sundance to this very, very interesting commission.

[00:06:14]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Yeah absolutely, Adrian. I'm, I'm ready for your flattery because this is definitely my first step into, you know, writing the sort of analysis and a report. On being, I'm not an academic person, you know, but I will say I am a dramaturg and dramaturgs are taught to read things and analyse things and look for story and look for pattern.

And I would say that is the skill that I brought to this report. Um, essentially during the pandemic, I know it was a hard time for everyone and especially in theatre, live performance, the world just fell down. Right around our ears. I think like, you know, within the first week, 80% of my friends were unemployed and the large amounts of them remain unemployed, unfortunately.

So like, during the, the pandemic, I think my first sort of reaction to the sort of time period was absolute shock and disbelief. And really not knowing what to do. Not knowing how to continue on my art form and how especially to support the artists that I had grown to love and I've been supporting for the last 15 years. But as per the usual with everything, the artist showed me the way.

Artists started coming up with new ideas and saying, Hey Jesse, are you working on a play? Should we work on a music video? Or Jesse, should we do a live sort of TikTok presentation? And that gave me a lot of hope. But I will say that like as the pandemic wore on, and, and I realised that this was going to be a long term thing –

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Jesse Cameron Alick: A real, a real sort of sadness set into me. And I remember distinctly in the fall of 2020 I had been quite depressed for about a month and I was laying, you know, on my couch in my, in my living room and I eventually just thought to myself, Jesse, what are you doing here? Are you, are we just going to, are we just going to be sad about life?

You know, why don't we do something to, you know, lift ourselves up and start doing what I'm probably best at, which is talking to people, chatting with people, making people feel comfortable and checking in and seeing how people are doing. And so that's really the impulse that this study came out of, which was a very selfish impulse that I was just like, Jesse, I want you to save yourself. I want you to see what's going on out there and see how you can help.

[00:08:11]
Adrian Ellis: So before we dive into the content, I just want to say a word about the form, because I think it's interesting and refreshing. This is a report based on 70 interviews and the interviews are all accessible. In other words, you can click through and read the interviews so you can draw your own conclusions as to the accuracy of the conclusions drawn by the author.

The report is well laid out as you would expect, but there is also a presentation, a live presentation of the report, which is substantively complete. That is to say, it's not a, you know, a three minute executive summary. It is the report and, you narrate that, and you narrate it very compellingly. It's produced, but it's not so overproduced that it's a distraction, so you're still very much focusing on the content. Was that your idea?

[00:08:57]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Thank you so much, Adrian. As much as I would love to claim the credit for that, I will say that my idea when I started on this phase of the report was to try and create a multimodal, manner of experiencing the support. So I knew that the report was going to be in presentation form, and then I wanted something else.

I wanted some sort of video form, but as for the usual, with my life, I started talking to an artist, Zach Murphy, who was a filmmaker and he had big ideas. He had gigantic ideas.

Adrian Ellis: (laughs)

Jesse Cameron Alick: I had an idea that you set up one camera in my living room and I read the report out to him, but he was like, no, Jesse, you know, let's make sure that we give people the opportunity to experience those reports in the most dynamic way possible.

Um, so I believe that we filmed all of that in about a week and a half. And he just had like idea after idea about how to make this report live in a dynamic way. So all the artistic flourishes that you'll see in that sort of film lecture version of the report are all Zach Murphy. And I was just completely thrilled by what he did and how he managed to encourage me who is – I am not an actor, but he encouraged me to be able to speak the words and then engaging with.

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Adrian Ellis: One more question before we, we pile in: The 70 interviewees. Can you just tell us broadly, as categories, who are they?

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Yep. Absolutely. Well, I mean, like in, in order to choose the um, uh, the interviewees, I did something that is very, you know, not scientific, which is that I sat down and thought to myself, who do I want to talk to? You know, who are the artists that I know, who I've ran into, that I've heard of, who are completely brilliant individuals and who I think, will have ideas about how we get out of this mess and, and essentially I just started reaching out to them, you know?

So, that's the, the sort of first wave of how I found them. And then um, I partnered with, uh, the Sundance Institute on this report of course, and talk to them – an interdisciplinary department. And the good folks over at the interdisciplinary department started adding names. They were like, oh, you should also talk to this person.

And what about this person who's working with augmented reality? And this person who's working with dance? And they really sort of, um, help to flash out the people that I spoke with. Um, so, we have arts administrators, then we have what I call performance innovators. These are people who work in performance in all sorts of different ways. Some of them are designers, some of them are choreographers, some of them are directors, some of them are playwrights, you know, but they're all artists who feels like they are innovating what live performance is.

And then we also have artistic leaders. And so these are leaders of not-for-profits, big institutions, you know, and then I would also add into that – thought leaders. Now thought leaders is a bit of a broad sort of thing, but like, um, these thought leaders are people that I know, they, if you ask them questions, they will have big thoughts, big ideas about the present and about the future. Um, I also spoke on lastly, with a number of donors also.

Adrian Ellis: Predominantly U.S. interviewees, but not exclusively. Correct?

Jesse Cameron Alick: Exactly. Yeah. It was interesting and, you know, because in some ways, as I like, sort of chose these people off the top of my head and got recommendations, I reproduced a lot of the sort of inequities within the field. So that means, number one, it's largely U.S. interviewees and in those U.S. interviewees, there's a lot of people from New York City and a lot of people from LA. But I will say that, you know, I think that there's, you know, probably about like, eight to 10 European arts people are represented. Um, I interviewed one gentleman in Lebanon, one woman in Uganda, um, and probably a couple other people scattered across the planet.

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Adrian Ellis: So, you drew four observations out from the 70 odd interviews, or you organise the observations around four, four large themes, and then you had four sort of suggestions on the way forward.

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Adrian Ellis: And the four broad observations I took away were, one, this has been a period of significant artistic innovation. Two, there is deep skepticism or was deep skepticism amongst your interviewees about the commitment of larger institutions in the performing art to racial equity. And whether they understood and had the appetite to dispatch the responsibilities that your interviews felt that they had.

Third, that you asked if European performance institutions have become extremely homogenised; both in what they produce and commission and how they do it, and are unnecessarily narrow in that and maybe reasons to explore in that. Fourth, that uh, they have overall as institutions failed to invest in their local communities.

Um, your four sort of suggestions on the way forward, uh, were, one, the exploration of new models of collective leadership. Two, uh, more imaginative and holistic patterns of funding for the artistic community. Three, that digital and hybrid is here to stay. It's not for everyone, but it needs to be addressed fully as an authentic avenue of artistic expression. And fourth, that we are missing appropriate places for what you called 'field aviation', which is basically where the debate about these sorts of issues should, in an equitable and inclusive manner, be conducted. If that's broadly, right? I'd love to go back through those and explore some of them.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: That was a wonderful summary, Adrian.

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Adrian Ellis: Okay. So, this is a period of artistic innovation, or has been a period of artistic innovation, and your interviewees most said that, and some said, this has been hell and I've closed down, or some said that. But for many, they have been forced into thinking about new ways of expression and things to express.

Uh, were you surprised by that?

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Oh, not really. I have to say that like, as I said earlier, artists really saved me, you know, with their ideas. The main job of being a dramaturg is to listen to artists, and to make their visions come alive. And artists were talking to me about new ideas left and right.

And I also think it's a universal truth that um, when difficulty and pressure comes, that's where innovation comes. That's where ideas pop through. For some people, the artistic impulse cannot be swatched. It only blooms when you take away all ways that can express it. It finds new ways to express itself.

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Adrian Ellis: And, what is the lesson that we learned from that? Because I can see the wrong lesson being drawn, if one isn't careful. (laughs)

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Jesse Cameron Alick: (laughs) Yeah, I would say that um, the lesson to be learned from this sort of time period of innovation, is that if you want to know what the future looks like, it's no big secret. Go and talk to the artists. All the sort of brilliant artists that I'm in community with, and I'm in relationship with, are always pointing to the future.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: And I would actually say that there were a number of artists that were already prepared for this time. There were a number of people that were already trying to figure out how their work can exist as, you know, a play, and also as a podcast. And also as a live stream – that people were already pushing the sort of edge of tomorrow.

I will say that none of us were listening to them. You know, like, we were, we were stuck in the present, you know, which is understandable, but like talk to the artists. Always listen to the artists and ask the artists, Hey, what is tomorrow going to look like? Because that's, that's the job of the artist, is to think about tomorrow. And hypothesise about what could be.

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Adrian Ellis: And when you say none of us, you mean the cadre of arts administrators who are responsible within institutions for commissioning, for producing, for engaging artists?

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Yeah. I'm, I'm talking about what is often referred to as gatekeepers um, in the arts world. Um, these are the people who make the decisions about what is good and what is not good, what will be produced, what will not be produced, will we be commissioned, what will get a tour and what will not. And I do include myself, you know, in that sort of group. I will say that a lot of the criticism of that sort of group, I take on myself as well.

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Adrian Ellis: So that segues into the second observation, which focuses on racial equity, but I suspect expands beyond racial equity, and it's a reckoning of a sort for larger cultural institutions. You focus on the um, performing arts, others have made similar observations about visual arts, which is that although they have certainly rhetorically aspired to be anchor institutions with a social agenda and have embraced rhetorically an agenda of racial equity – particularly over the last two years for all well-known reasons, there is skepticism about both the authenticity and the effectiveness of larger institutions in this context.

How uniform was that observation in the 70 odd interviews? In other words, was that uh, you know, was that a leitmotif? Did that come through again and again?

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Jesse Cameron Alick: That was an extremely strong motif. A number of people asked me the same sort of questions of institutions. They expressed the exact same sort of skepticism. A lot of people are hearing a lot of ratter, or even if we can frame it in a more optimistic sense, a lot of people are hearing a lot of um, ideas or hope that the future will be different from institutions, but they aren't seeing action. So I could probably count the number of people that I interviewed that did not agree with that. And I could count them on one hand.

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Adrian Ellis: This is immensely serious, because the predominance of funding, the predominance of attention, the predominance of gatekeeping power lies with those institutions.

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Adrian Ellis: And you are saying in effect, that the thought leaders and the artists that – even insofar as you as a representative, are skeptical of the competence and good faith of those institutions.

I find that remarkable, and I'm not challenging it for a moment. I, I'm just saying that it is an extremely serious observation. And I think it's one of the things in the report that needs to be taken very seriously. I'm now going to ask you that second question, which is, as you're both inside and outside some of these institutions, do you agree with it?

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Um, I, I do agree uh, with, the interviewees. I think, I think that the skepticism that artists have about institutions is completely justified. And I will agree with you also that I think it's um, it's important to highlight, and it's also a disturbing observation. What we do creating art is based so much on belief.

And if we don't have trust, if the artists don't trust the institutions and institutions don't trust the artists, everything that we're doing falls apart. So I think it's a, it's a very big problem. I would say that like, if you look at the before times – before the pandemic, things were going great for institutions. You know, institutions, you know, especially here in the United States, it was, it was a boom time, financially.

A lot of institutions were starting gigantic capital campaigns to build new buildings, you know, and to expand their sort of programmes. Theatres were producing more work than ever before, Broadway was booming. Everyone was doing great, and they were making, just tons of money off of it.

The only person that wasn't making money off it was the actual artists who were making the work. And so, it can look at like the sort of institutions, you know, the gravity of them wanting to go back, to the before times, is a very strong gravity. And the artists are noticing that the institutions, you know, are talking a lot of talk, but they actually aren't making the sort of material changes – the big, gigantic changes that the sort of artists want and the artists need.

So I, I stand with the artists and I say that they should be skeptical of institutions, and they should continue to put the pressure on institutions to put their money where their mouth is.

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Adrian Ellis: So, you mentioned life pre COVID for these larger institutions, but isn't it possible to see some of the signs of uh, this phenomenon before COVID and to, to see that in some ways um, they have for some time being, losing another plot, and that plot is their role in creativity and their role in innovate, artistic innovation.

And um, so I'm just curious to know whether you see a through line in, in this unfolding – notwithstanding the superficially flush place in which they were pre COVID.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Um, the interesting, one of the most interesting things I think about my study is that nothing is new in it. That none of the results or none of the observations in the study that I did were gigantic revelatory things that no one has been thinking about.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: They are things that people have been thinking about for years and years and years. It just came into really clear contrast during the pandemic and things were just lifted to the surface.

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Adrian Ellis: I think this segues into the next question, but I don't want to, I don't want to neglect the core of your observation, which was about racial equity. If you were to talk to senior managers in many of the larger institutions that I talk to in the context of the day jobs as it were, they would say, yes, we stand guilty because for a long period of time, we talked the talk, but didn't walk the walk.

So in a sense, we are being called, uh, to account for our own rhetoric. They would then say however, that even if they are moving in good faith, the pace at which they are able to move large institutions with respect to racial equity, is not significantly faster than the pace at which they can move most other areas of these slow moving liners. And they would probably ask for some slack to be cut, to take into account the realities of the speed at which they can move, fair or self-serving observation?

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Ah, that's interesting. It's both, of course, you know, it is, it is fair because I am, I'm an institutional man, Adrian, you know, I was, I was raised in institutions so I understand how institutions work, especially big institutions, you know, which often work at glacial speeds. But I would say, you know, that this conversation again, isn't a new conversation.

It's one that's been happening for years and years and years. And if you just take one metric of change, you know – which is what leadership looks like. If we were to um, look at the, sort of, the big off-Broadway theatres in New York City, the big not-for-profit sort of theatres and, and if you set aside the sort of traditionally, you know, black theatres and traditionally Asian American theatres – which aren't big off-Broadway theatres, they're, you know, they're institutions of their own sort of built and they don't have the budget sizes of the big off, off-Broadways.

There are no black artistic directors. I believe also, I'm the only black associate artistic director in New York City. And this is a year and a half after a global racial reckoning. This is, you know, probably about 10, 15 years into this conversation about, you know, what leadership looks like.

So I will say, you know, I will grant that institutions, you know, we should give them time. But also, you know, that's fine. Give me a three-year plan then. I would love to see a plan that, that um, ambitions how we're going to change our leadership, how we're going to um, support artists and how we're going to, you know, have more people of colour in sort of gatekeeping positions and power.

And even if that plan's a three to five-year plan, I think that's fine, you know? I'm all about the roadmap. Right now, it doesn't feel like there's a roadmap and it doesn't feel like people are taking the actual steps to build a roadmap. So I would say, you know, yes, you know, time is an absolutely honest thing to ask for. But not if you're solid.

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Adrian Ellis: Craftly made point. Segue into the next, your third observation. Again, the, the logical construction of your report is fantastic. So homogeneity, what the hell is going on?

Jesse Cameron Alick: (laughs)

Adrian Ellis: What are the underlying dynamics of your observation that there is a convergence uh, not a healthy convergence where there should be diversity and experimentation, there's an artistic huddling, which over time both deadens the creative ecology, and also vitiates these institutions. Tell me what you think is driving that.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Absolutely. I mean, like, the, the homogenisation of the, the sort of theatre and live performance field, it's pretty much guaranteed over the course of the, the United States. And I would say that like, you know, to point like one big gigantic finger at it, you know, I think that you can, you can point to capitalism, you can, um, you can point to the idea that everyone has been focused on individual success and how to make my theatre, the biggest theatre.

And the way that people have figured out how to do that is to copy the other theatres. Look for the one show that is the big gigantic successful show. And then just do that show. Now this is ironic um, because like, you know, the, the, the reason why art becomes exciting and art becomes, you know, really, really successful, I think is almost a hundred percent of the time is it's breaking boundaries. It's doing something new, it's doing something wild.

And so ironically, instead of investing in um, new art that's doing something wild so that everyone can lift up all these um, gems, institutions are actually focusing on the one that was a breakout success. And then just doing that show or focusing on the one artist who was a breakout success and then just photocopying that artist.

I think capitalism has a lot to blame for it. I think that like, institutions need to cover the bottom line in the same way that institutions in the United States at least do a Christmas Carol every single December. You know, they know that if they do this successful show, they will be able to cover the bottom line and they'd be able to make their ticket sales.

So unfortunately it means that a lot of institutions are sort of looking at New York City, finding the exciting show and then just photocopying that around the United States.

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Adrian Ellis: Well, if you're running an institution, surely it's legitimate for you to seek to balance your budget. And one of the ways in which you balance your budget is to have your Nutcracker or whatever, but surely it's what you do with the proceeds of that Nutcracker that matter. In other words, it's whether you are cross subsidising your mission for – if you have a mission for innovation and for, for artistic development, rather than putting it into overhead or expanding your building or, or whatever else.

In other words the convergence, and you're saying it's a convergence towards basically operations that either breakeven or minimise cost, rather than a convergence on a particular artists or convergence on a particular genre.

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Adrian Ellis: Surely if you're running an institution, you have a responsibility to do some of that. But the only necessity to do only that, is if you built yourself a business model that has no venture or risk capital available for artistic innovation. And isn't that the accusation to make in a sense, that people running institutions have not thought about their obligation to ensure that there are funds for artistic innovation – even if those funds are generated by, you know, shorthand, The Nutcracker.

[00:27:10]
Jesse Cameron Alick: And, and listen, like running an institution is no easy work. You know, and I think that like, for these leaders who are running these institutions, they are trying to balance the budget and they're trying to make sure that their institution's sustainable over a long period of time.

But part of making sure that your institution is sustainable, is investing in relationships with artists and investing especially in the innovative work of tomorrow. And if you're not investing in the work of tomorrow, you are building a bridge to nowhere. Um, and you can continue to build this bridge by piling on all of the work of today, you know, all the work that you know is exciting and will sell tickets, but if you're not throwing that money into the future, it really does like sort of, bring to me the question of, so what is your mission?

What, what are your values of your institutions? If you're an institution and you say that your, your mission, you know, let's like take uh, commercial theatre, you know, on Broadway and the West End. They're, you know, in some ways they're beautifully clear. Because their mission is, you know, to sell tickets and to make money, you know. And that's very, that's almost beautifully clear.

It's not exactly what I'm into, but it's very clear, you know. Whereas the not-for-profits, I feel like we have lost our mission. We're not quite sure what our exact mission is. And um, we have been tempted by capitalism into just focusing on today. How can we make money today? How can we make sure our institutions, you know, will live for a very long time, ignoring the fact that our institutions will live upon the backs of creative artists. And I think, I think we have to invest in that creativity of tomorrow. Or we will have nowhere to go.

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Adrian Ellis: So, I think I would paraphrase that by saying that the mission has become institutional survival, and that institutional longevity or survival, institutional growth, becomes the abiding mission of board and management. And that would suggest, a sort of late capitalist ethos.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: Well, Adrian, can I add something to that actually, because like, you know, I love how you put that, you know, that the values of institutional survival, and that comes also with institutional growth. You know, institutions are being like, the way that we survive is get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, you know, with, and not concentrate on the artists, but only concentrate on how to survive and how to get bigger – which again, points to late stage capitalism.

[00:29:19]
Adrian Ellis: So, let me ask you a question, which is, which segues into the fourth of your observations, which is that many institutions that failed to invest in their local communities. So let's go to mission, and let me ask you to what extent you feel larger cultural institutions should have, integral to their mission, a set of responsibilities – vis-a-vis the communities in which they're located.

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Jesse Cameron Alick: It's, it's a really good question. I mean, like, theatre and live performance is different than other sort of um, artistic, you know, um, uh, venture such as television and film, you know. Everyone watches that, that's everywhere, you know, but if you look at a theatre and live performance, it's very, very dependent on who's actually physically there. You know, who are the human beings who live in bodies, who'll walk through your doors.

And so it's an interesting kind of question, you know, about like how vital are we, as theatre um, sort of artists, you know, what is our role in society? Are we entertaining people, you know, or are we um, is our role to unlock things, bring up conversations, unlock boxes, you know, that we were all talking about?

I would argue the latter. I would say that like, you know, that is our job, you know, in theatre live performance, we are, when we are talking to people who are actually there, I think that like, you know, listen, in terms of personal tastes, I love theatre that talks about the community that we're in, the city that we're in, the state that we're in, the country that we're in, the world that we're in.

And an amazing piece of theatre hopefully will talk to us on different levels. You know, hopefully it'll talk about on a global level and a local level at the same time. But if it's not talking on a local level at all, and we're only sort of shipping in the big projects from other sort of like, cities that are big money makers, I do wonder about how we are ignoring the conversation that is happening in our own community and ignoring what our audience members actually want to hear about.

So, so I would say that on one hand. And then I would say also, we know, when we talk about local communities, we're also talking about local artistic communities too. There are artists everywhere, you know, there are writers and actors and playwrights and directors and like, you know, augmented reality people.

Every single place, and every single community, you know, so if an institution is housed in a community, but refuses to work with the artists who are actually surrounding them and actually in the, in the community, I wonder why that institution is even in that community in the first place. They could be anywhere, if they, if they wanted to.

Why are they located where they are? And I think that's a great question to start with, with institutions. Why are you, in New York City? Why are you in Kansas? Why are you, you know, in London? Does location have anything to do with what you do?

[00:31:49]
Adrian Ellis: So I'm curious, I think your hope is that institutions respond to this clarion call, they address agenda meaningfully, authentically in good faith, and probably at a faster pace than is in evidence so far. What happens, in your view, if they don't?

[00:32:08]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Sure. I would say number one, that like um, I really believe that, that we can't do this on our own, and the artists, you know, and independent sort of, you know, theatre and live performance artists have to work with institutions. But it's a great question of like, what happens if institutions decide not to respond?

And I think two things happen. Number one, you know, if you're in a relationship with someone and they refuse to engage you in conversation, you should leave that relationship eventually, you know? And so like, if an institution won't respond to you and doesn't want to change, that's the institution's prerogative, you know, and you should leave that relationship.

There are other relationships that you can get into. You know, so that would be my, my first response to it. And the second response to if an institution refuses to respond to this, and specifically it's the institutional leadership that refuses to respond to this, you know, then I think it's time for new leadership. I think we have to really look seriously, you know, at how we're going to change leadership, and that does mean artistic directors, especially in the United States who have been seated for 30, 40, sometimes 50 years.

They really need to look at how they are serving the community. And if they're serving the community by staying in leadership or if they can step aside and allow new leadership to come in, that can engage in that conversation.

[00:33:17]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:33:25]
Adrian Ellis: Okay, if that is what the landscape looks like, where do we move from here? Your first, was around collective leadership and different patterns of, and compositions of, and styles of leadership. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

[00:33:39]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Well, it was interesting, you know, it's, it's worth saying that like, you know, as I did these interviews, I didn't have the sort of themes, you know, set out at the beginning, obviously. You know, but as people started to talk them about things, you know, the themes made themselves known. And this idea of shared leadership, it was a big theme that the people kept on talking about.

And the idea that like, you know, we have this, this hierarchical sort of motive leadership where one person is, you know, has a crown on their head and they're the one, they are the tastemaker and they decide, you know, what is good and what is not good.

And that was a really interesting sort of thing that everyone observed and everyone observed the same solution, which, which everyone said that the solution was not just to like, get rid of all the standard straight white men, you know, throw them out on the street and replace them with, you know, brown people, you know, um, in the leadership, because that would actually replicate the exact same sort of problem that we have. Then we'd still have one person in leadership who is deciding that it's only their taste that's deciding, you know, how an institution is run.

[00:34:35]
Jesse Cameron Alick: But the idea that like, if you have more than one leader and you put those leader in, in conversation with each other, especially if those leaders have different tastes, you're going to create the sort of beautiful tension in leadership, this beautiful debate and conversation that's happening that will actually make the work more eclectic, more exciting. The institutions will be doing a greater diversity of work.

And again, I think that this idea of shared leadership fights against the served, the capitalist sort of impulse to say that one person can be great. We have one person who will be on top, and it really pushes toward the idea that like, our goal shouldn't be that we are singularly great, but that we are collectively great, that all of us can be lifted up at the same time together. And so the idea of shared leadership was a beautiful theme that people repeated to me.

[00:35:19]
Adrian Ellis: But there's also a good quote in, with one of your interviewees about the infinite time required to negotiate a satisfactorily collected leadership. How realistic?

[00:35:32]
Jesse Cameron Alick: That's a, that's a great question. I think that with a lot of these sorts of like, you know, themes and a lot of these ambitions, I think that the, the question of like, what's the realism behind it? And I think to actually have collective leadership, you have to have a number of people. You have to find the um, the sort of people, and then you have to negotiate, you know, what the mode of collective leadership is, how are we going to do this?

Because it's not going to work the same for every single institution. It's going to be really, really quite bespoke. And then once you have that, you know, coming to consensus, especially, let's say three artistic directors coming to consensus, is going to take conversation, it's going to take debate, and it's going to take time. And that's an interesting sort of thing.

Every single one of these solutions has a cost to it. And, and I think that's important to mention all the sort of costs. And if we have shared leadership, it means that decisions are going to take more time, and people are going to have to debate them more. But I think that they will be better decisions.

[00:36:20]
Adrian Ellis: Holistic, artistic support. That theme there, seemed to be that the way in which funding for artists is sliced and diced is not only inadequate in absolute terms, but antipathetic to the sorts of ways in which work is generated and created. And that, with again, honourable exceptions, the sort of support that the sector needs, the way in which funding operates is antithetical to the sort of support the sector needs. Can you unpack that a bit?

[00:36:53]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Well, I'll say this. I mean, you know the saying you can't make a living in the theatre, but you can make a killing or whatever, but that's actually not, that's not a truth I'm saying, because you can make living in the theatre. It's very easy to make a living in sort of American theatre, I would say. Um, you just work as a marketing manager or you work as a development officer or you work as a company dramaturg like me or associate artistic director, you can make a living off of it.

[00:37:14]
Jesse Cameron Alick: But we have this inverted pyramid where there are thousands of people who make a living off the theatre, and they're all built upon the backs of these one or two individuals who are writing these plays or directing these plays, these generative artists. And they can't make a living off of the theatre.

They have to get jobs in other sort of, you know, areas. They have to get television jobs or they have to be teachers. And like what kind of Industry. Do we have that can't actually support the people who are, who are supporting thousands and thousands of people, you know, just in terms of self-respect I think that we have to employ these people and actually it wouldn't be hard, you know?

I'd say that, like, you know, like if you gave a hundred thousand dollars to every single playwright in your season, you know, um, that's only if you have 10 plays in your season, that's an extra million dollars. You know, there are many institutions out there that are $50 million institutions, a million dollars means nothing.

It's just a choice. You know, it's a choice of where we're going to put our resources and how we're going to invest in people. I would say that like, you know, this, this doesn't feel like a new need to me. I think that we've never supported our artists um, in, in the United States at least, you know, we've never carved a pathway for them to actually be working artists who can live in the cities that they work in and who can raise families and not have to work three or four other jobs. And that's simply because of the priorities and that we have, we have sold this myth that the artists will always be starving them and there's just no way we can support them.

And that is just not true, you know, there are a number of ways, you know, we just employ them, we give them jobs, you know, and, and once you do that, you will actually see. And like, um, and there's a number of sort of artists who are resident artists that various theatre companies, Suzan-Lori Parks is the resident artist-in-residence at the public theatre and she has been for the last 10 years. And that has given that's allowed her the sort of time and space to write the most epic, brilliant wild pieces. You know, in the last 10 years she's been doing crazy, amazing work because she doesn't have to worry about a day job.

I think that's actually how you make innovative work, how you make work that will attract everyone is that you take this sort of burden off of the artist shoulders, um for their survival.

[00:39:13]
Adrian Ellis: And they were extremely eloquent on, on what that meant. And the difference, between having that support and not, and that I take it. You see, as a responsibility of the larger institutions that are the focus of your earlier critique.

[00:39:27]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Yeah, I would say like, you know, if I were to be um, rather bold, but I think in many ways, not bold enough, I say that every single theatre should have a playwright-in-residence and a director-in-residence and a designer-in-residence at the bare minimum. At the bare minimum employ three artists full-time and give them health insurance.

If every single institution did this, we still wouldn't fix the problems. It's worth saying that, that, that wouldn't, sort of bandaid for the entire thing, but it would be a start, you know, and I think that's actually the bare minimum, the institutions.

[00:39:55]
Adrian Ellis: Your third, your penultimate observation is that digital and hybrid is here to stay. And that this is a good thing. uh, and we're not simply talking about digital distribution, we're talking about ways of working that are wholly uh, wholly new that have necessarily been accelerated by COVID that this is here to stay, but that institutions need to have the skills and the sensibilities to engage with this work, and don't necessarily currently.

[00:40:26]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Well, you know, if you look at like the artists that actually flourished during the sort of a pandemic, they were all interdisciplinary artists, they were heightened artists. I think that the, um, different mediums working together is the future. You know, it just really is. I think that's, that can be hard for theatre people. Um, wrestle with and to, to understand, because in the theatre we would still be lighting our stages with candles, if we could it, you know, we, we, we um, fight against, you know, um, innovation sometimes in the theatre and we love tradition in the theatre, but the future is knocking on the door and we were dragged into the future by this uncertain time period. If you had asked me before the pandemic, Hey Jesse, what are you interested? Are you interested in sort of digital theatre? I would have told you, no, not really. You know, I would have told you that I do live theatre with people, you know, in-person in the same way, you know, but the pandemic really sort of shook my world and showed me, you know, that, you know, lighting stages with candles, isn't the way to go anymore.
And that like we, human beings were, we only, we live our lives in person, but nowadays we also live our lives online. On Instagram, you know, in TikTok on the go. And actually, you know, we can't ask the audience always to come to us. We should go to the audience also, and we should wrestle with the future.

[00:41:37]
Adrian Ellis: Your final point is that there needs to be or the need to be more fora for the discussion of these issues in which there is wide participation. And I assume that that includes the participation of those institutions that need to either reform to accommodate some of these observations or have a difficult future.

So, do you have ideas about the character of that? The nature of that, the infrastructure of that discussion.

[00:42:11]
Jesse Cameron Alick: This idea of field ideation was an idea that I had not really considered, you know, this idea that the theatre and live performance communities that we're like a family and we just can't talk to each other.

We can't get it right. You know, and even, even over the sort of last year and a half of the sort of racial reckoning has something beautiful in the way the voices have been lifted up. You know, institutions have been held to account, but even that isn't healthy communication, we're, we're throwing rocks at people, you know, and expecting them to respond to conversation.

We're, we're calling people out and dragging them, um, publicly. And although that feels great sometimes, I mean, a lot of these people absolutely deserve it. That actually isn't the way that you have a conversation, a healthy conversation with your sort of peers and with your family. So this idea of field ideation is one that I really believe in.

And, um, as it sort of spread, people have been talking to me quite a lot about this idea, because I would say Adrian, this last theme is actually, maybe it should be the first theme because it's really the one that to start with. Uh, like this study itself, doesn't give a lot of um, how do we do this?

You know, it doesn't get big solutions cause I actually don't have the big solutions. But the big solutions will come from this fourth theme from getting everyone in the same room and starting to talk about things and figuring out what is the sort of way that we can have honest and ethical conversations with each other.

And that means everyone from the artist to the sort of gatekeepers, you know, to the donors, to everyone. How do we talk about our community in a really honest way and observe what we, what we have been seeing and have people, you know, call us out and have the people who are called out, not feel attacked and actually able to respond and say, hey, I did this because of this reason, how can I change and figure out solutions together?

Because there are enough brains. There are, you know, doing this study really taught me that we have all the brain power that we need. There are brilliant people working in the industry. There are so many people with great ideas. We're just not sharing with them, with each other and we're not implementing them.

Um, and we have it like toss them around. Um, So we have all the ideas. We have all the brain power and now we just need to talk to each other and figure out what the sort of steps are, you know, I've been very happy, you know, as myself and Sundance, as we've had conversations with different artists and different institutions have been approaching us, we're, we're sort of approaching the idea of how do we start this conversation?

How can this study be the first step into like, you know, having a bigger conversation and having like an in-person convening where, you know, people can gather and people can say, hey Jesse, your study was awesome for this, or, hey Jesse, your study had gigantic holes in it. Why didn't you talk to these people and these people and these people. What about these ideas that, worked in your study? I very much long for that.

[00:44:51]
Adrian Ellis: I would only make two observations. One is they may not be big ideas. The big ideas may already be there. It may be a series of smaller ideas, a large number of small ideas that enable those ideas. And the other observation is that climate of opinion is immensely important. The leadership of the cultural sector is quite conservative in that it tends to look, you know, to side to side foundations, look to foundations and see what one or the other doing. Arts leaders tend to look to arts leaders and so changing the climate of opinion, I think it's what politicians call the Overton window, which is the window of what is politically acceptable with a small P.

Changing those perceptions seems as critical as sort of technical answers in a sense, oh, we need to do X or Y. It's changing what's acceptable to do. And debate does that. Documents like yours does that. Discussion does that. It changes what people regard as legit and therefore what they feel able to do within their sort of innate caution.

So I would say, um, you're right. That field ideation and thinking about the forum for that debate, and also making sure that that debate, is a very inclusive one and includes as it were the guys who may feel that rocks are being lobbed at them to include them or at least seek to include them in that conversation?

[00:46:12]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Yup, absolutely. I might just add also, you know, in, in addition to that cause I love how you said that you know that also uh, fortune favours the bold. Um, And I think that this time period, you know, another way to, you know, push the sort of needle is that there will need to be leaders that are like, hey, we're just going to do it.

We're just going to do this bold thing. And we're going to take these first steps and we're going to show you all how it's done, you know? And sometimes it just takes one person. She'll just do it. You know, you're like, I love these recommendations, we're going to implement them, you know? And, and so that like other institutions who are looking side to side to see what other people are doing. Like, oh, look at what my sister um, institution just did. Hey, if they did it, maybe we can too.

[00:46:52]
Adrian Ellis: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. Jesse, thank you again for a fascinating conversation and I think a really important one. And just to say it again, one based, I think on a, on an extremely lucid report that deserves to be very widely circulated. It was a privilege to talk to you and thank you for taking the time out of a very busy life.

[00:47:13]
Jesse Cameron Alick: Adrian. It was absolutely my pleasure. And thank you for talking with me about the future.

[00:47:19]
Adrian Ellis: Listeners, if you want more check out thethreebells.net to find external references and other resources linked to this episode and to Jesse's work. But stick around for a conversation between myself and Criena Gehrke, as we explore some of the implications of this report for cultural districts and cultural institutions.

[00:47:39]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:47:44]
Adrian Ellis: Criena, how's the Gold Coast?

[00:47:47]
Criena Gehrke: Look, it's still beautiful as always. And can I say how much I loved the conversation that you had with Jesse?

[00:47:54]
Adrian Ellis: Thanks. I thought it was a really interesting conversation and an important one. And he's clearly a very articulate advocate and I think a very reasoned advocate of the position. And that's the position uh, that I want to explore with you today. Really to ask you is what he's saying important? And what his interviewees are saying are important?

Why is it important? And if it's important, why are institutions like yours finding it difficult to accommodate the implicit or explicit recommendations in his analysis?

[00:48:29]
Criena Gehrke: Look I think my first response, Adrian, is to really recommend anyone that's listening to this podcast to go to *Emerging from the Cave* and to engage with that report. Because I think that it does say some important, deep and really rich things about where we need to be going as a sector. I am in raging agreement with what has evolved out of that report, which is that artists are important.

You know, like what are we doing if we're not supporting our artists? If we're not creating platforms for great work to develop, if we're not investing in young artists. But even as I say that it's such a motherhood statement, you know?

I work for an institution, I'm a CEO and I'm saying, what else create platforms for the artists and what really came out was, how do we empower a different kind of leadership and a different approach to creative endeavour and you know, anyone that's heard me bang on publicly, continually hears me say to my own institution - You don't call yourself a home of the arts without truly deeply believing in the power of artists to make a difference to the world. And this report just focused on that so eloquently.

So, do I think it's an important piece of work? Absolutely. Do I think that it's one of the clearest, most engaging articulations of some key themes and challenges and opportunities that are facing us as a sector? Absolutely. That idea of collective leadership, holistic artistic support, you know, the future of the very art form through digital theatre and this idea that we need to engage in these conversations and debates.

The reality is, that when you are responsible for a large institution, that can not be as easy as what you'd first anticipate. So you have to balance the commercial requirements and the financial stability of the organization with the art. You have to respond to what audiences want and sometimes on the Gold Coast, that continues to be what Jesse spoke, probably more in the commercial theatre space, the big musical, the things that are recognizable, like star bands and live music.

[00:50:57]
Criena Gehrke: So you've got to balance those things. You've got the political whim of the day. You know, what is the expectation of some of your benefactors, philanthropists, government in that. So it's a complex ecosystem. But at the end of the day, you know, we're not, gonna change unless we change. So what is it that we truly value? And I think what is coming out loudly and clearly is that we need to pay more attention to artists.

[00:51:23]
Adrian Ellis: Can you unpack that a bit? What does that mean in practice?

[00:51:27]
Criena Gehrke: You know, we really have right from the get-go, as a precinct and a place and an institution invested in artists. So for us, what that looks like and bless Jesse, you know, that idea of artistic support where artists are employed full-time. So for HOTA, we've just released our program of support for local artists and we've done exactly that. We've got three opportunities for artists to be on the payroll for a period of time, they do have access to annual leave, to personal leave to superannuation.

They're a core part of the HOTA team. They're employed to not only develop their own work, but to be absolutely central to this organization and to help us to realise, what artists require to have, that job security. And also, so that you have that daily exchange where artists have a deeper understanding of, you know, that beast that can be a large institution.

So HOTA has a deep commitment. This idea that artists are central to what we do. we have, right from the get-go supported local companies. So we have a series of home companies that, uh, resident with us that we provide financial and venue support to. And also we work with, to deliver some of our programming. We are deeply connected to our place. So we really think about what is it that our community requires. So that often looks like commissioning artists to create site-specific work that is of this place.

And this was also within the report and within the conversation. We invest in it, you know, so we take our annual budgets and we go, what percentage of that budget are we actually going to allocate to supporting artists? And it needs to be long and it needs to be meaningful.

[00:53:34]
Adrian Ellis: So the analysis is quietly, very radical. There's an argument in there that says, if you want to address the needs of artists, if you want to address full-on racial and social inequities, if you want to address the dangers of a sort of convergence in uh, a sort of international path, if you like. If you want to address the neglect of the highly local, then you need to change the model. And that many larger institutions as they're currently run, and as they're currently structured, will find it extremely difficult to accommodate that agenda, And so, you know, he discusses opportunities for collective leadership.

You've mentioned a way of supporting artists and their work, which is more holistic. And I just wondered whether you think that the way in which most of the larger presenting and producing organizations with which we're familiar, whether they can accommodate the sort of changes in that current structures, or whether there is a more, fundamental reckoning that that would need to be had in order to accommodate them.

[00:54:44]
Criena Gehrke: I was very thoughtful as to whether it's an either or for major institutions. Because the way that we look at it at HOTA is almost the fact that we are both a commercial endeavour and let's face it, we're a hospitality business as well. A lot of our revenues relying on food and beverage. But we also very much see ourselves as that development, innovator, incubator model as well.

And we always talk about the fact that when we feel we've got it the most right, it's a collision of all three of those things. So I do think that institutions, you don't need to blow the whole model out of the water to get the kind of results that we're talking about, that you can compartmentalize and allocate resources to each of those areas.

I also wonder whether it's not so much about the model, but the intent. You know, so many of these conversations and these fantastic rich podcasts that um, we're having the opportunity to create really come back to what is the core purpose? You know, so, do institutions actually need to rethink their purpose or confirm what their purpose is and then hold themselves accountable to that.

[00:56:03]
Adrian Ellis: How do you think that this debate should be taken forward? Jesse's writing about the performing arts in the context mainly of the United States. But it clearly has international significance and I think that uh, we could have a very similar discussion about visual arts. And I think that one of the important things is, for that debate to include both those institutions and their critics, rather than their critics in one camp and those institutions in another.

And I thought that Jesse's comments on those and about not lobbing rocks at one another, but engaging in dialogue was extremely interesting. And he, talks about the need for forums for ideation. What's your take on that.

[00:56:44]
Criena Gehrke: I think absolutely there needs to be more ways of us coming together to problem solve and to understand the complexities of this situation. And when I reflect on my own experience in recent days, you know, the release of our latest program that supports artists and it's called ArtKeeper as I spoke about previously, actually came out of a deep reach conversation with local artists where HOTA was heading off down one path, and then when we actually had a check-in with the artists and really the check-in was a zoom meeting to say we're back in lockdown. How are you guys going? What can we do to support? What came out was I can't pay my rent. I can't get a lease on a house because I don't have consistency of employment. I can't feed my children.

I can't get my other grant applications done because I don't have the capacity because I'm home-schooling. There's a whole bunch of stuff in there, Adrian, that I went, oh, hold on. We're not on the right path here. They don't want short term support to create yet another work that may or may not be presented.

They need employment, you know, and I think that even that in a really small way, indicates that if the institutions, the supporters, the philanthropists, the smart, critical thinkers and thought leaders, and most of all, the artists come together to have those discussions. Then we're going to be able to find with goodwill and a values-based approach initiatives that actually respond directly to what the artists in your community require of you and we have a moral obligation to do it. I believe.

[00:58:32]
Adrian Ellis: I think that is a great note to end on. And I'm really grateful to you for such honesty about the perspective of somebody who is balancing all the multiple pressures that are inherent in keeping a an institution like HOTA on the road. So thank you very much. It's always great to talk to you and I look forward to our next encounter, Criena.

[00:58:55]
Criena Gehrke: Thanks, Adrian, it's always a delight. Watch this report people, it's important.

[00:59:01]
Adrian Ellis: The Three Bells is produced by AEA consulting and supported by the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcasts and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you haven't already done so please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform of choice. My name's Adrian Ellis, thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:59:28]
THEME MUSIC