

***Stick Around***

Welcome to APHIDS' Keynote project for 2019, *Exit Strategies*, a performance about mobility, privilege, and ways to disappear. We have asked ourselves what it is to leave – personally, politically, globally, historically and through bad mime. As non-Indigenous Australians, if we should leave the country, as women artists if we should give up now. If we should let go of the past, quit yoga, and go underground. To help us keep asking such questions we have invited writers Jane Howard and Erica McCalman into our rehearsal room, to sit with our ideas and to consider what leaving means to them.

We are so grateful to work with a team of powerful artists on this project who have all infused the work with their own magic.



Naarm/Melbourne, November, 2019.

APHIDS acknowledges the people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land upon which we work. This project was made possible through the generous support of Arts House, the Australia Council for the Arts, the City of Melbourne, and Creative Victoria. Development for *Exit Strategies* was supported by Arts House's CULTURELAB, Adhocracy at Vitalstatistix, Australia Council's EMPAC residency, New York and UNSW.

## My Exits

Jane Howard

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I'm trying to remember my exits.

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I always exited parties quietly, without saying goodbye. I would slip out unnoticed and quietly, never wanting to take up too much space, never wanting to draw attention to myself.

I try and remember the last time I snuck out of a party with my friends from highschool, in those post-high-school years where I knew they weren't really my friends anymore and they knew I wasn't really their friend anymore, but I was still invited.

Until one day I slipped out without saying goodbye. And until one day I wasn't invited anymore.

A last silent exit I didn't realise was a last exit.

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It is Fringe in Adelaide, and everyone I know has come to see *Fleabag*. We say hi and how are you and have you seen anything good and isn't it hot.

We say 'better go in' and 'see you after the show' and 'let's get a drink it would be great to catch up'.

And then the play starts and then the play ends and when it ends I am immobile with tears. I hide my head in my hands. My friend places a protective arm around my shoulder and everyone pretends not to see me. I want to stay there and hide and never leave but it is Fringe, and so the theatre needs to bump out and bump in again, and people are trying to move chairs and there is a crying girl in the middle of the seats they need to rearrange.

And so we sneak out a side door and walk in the opposite direction to everyone I know and we hide in a corner of the park until it feels, maybe, safe to leave again.

\*

I'm leaving Adelaide, and I tell people, and I have drinks at the pub and say goodbye and say I'll visit and say well, I guess that's it!

I don't think I am leaving Melbourne. And then I am on what I thought was summer holidays and it is January and I get an email, and my contract won't be renewed. And, all of a sudden, my life in Melbourne has exited from me. There was no goodbye,

I hide in the ambiguity. Where do you live now? people ask. And I shrug and say I don't know. Here. Anywhere.

I don't tell people where I am coming from or where I am going to.

There is a freedom in never being anywhere, so you never have to leave.

\*

There was a time when the internet wasn't real life: where it was a space separate to ourselves and our places in the world and the people we spent time with.

It was a place of MSN messenger and brb and ttyl, a place where conversations ended. And then one day we logged off and we didn't log on again.

Now our conversations are in private messages and group chats and they never really end. They just exist threaded throughout our days, these constant lifelines we can reach out to.

And there is never a need to say goodbye because the conversation never really started and it will never really end.

But one day that conversation just won't exist anymore. Probably without anyone noticing.

\*

I become adept at sneaking out of theatres. Of knowing the exits and the relationship to the bar and the streets and the path everyone else will take so I don't need to see them. I ride a bike for fitness and for ease and for fun but also because it allows a quick and quiet get away. I don't want to be trapped. I always want an exit.

Theatre, perhaps, is the worst space for someone who wants to exit unseen. There are too many conventions: the time the show starts, the time it ends. You enter en masse you leave en masse.

When is the time to exit in hiding?

\*

My best friend tells me she is moving interstate. I cry. Three days later, my therapist tells me she is moving interstate. I cry. Perhaps I could live without one, but both seems too much.

I tell my boss I have a migraine. I stay home from work to cry.

\*

I set up my tweets to autodelete. Pockets of thoughts being eaten up behind me, exiting the world silently. I find peace in that.

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Keanu Reeves (55) is being celebrated for going out with Alexandra Grant (46).

I think about all of the women forced into invisibility by their age: seen as ignorable, or disposable. Replaceable by a much younger woman.

Or by a man.

(His age never matters.)

\*

I think about theatre as a place of ritual. The shared gathering in time and space. The necessary component of time.

The way we sit in our seats all facing one direction, and we get quiet when the house-lights go down, and we laugh or we clap or we cry or we gasp, and then, at the end, the people on stage bow, and the people in the audience clap, and then the lights come up, and then – if it's a good theatre and if it's a good show – we congregate afterwards to talk and drink and love, and if it's not a good theatre and if it's not a good show we sneak off quietly into the night.

And how perhaps I like matinees now because they let me to practice this ritual in a way which is quieter, with more space around me, and in a way I can properly hold the show by myself.

And in this quiet hiding I don't have to say hello and I don't have to say goodbye, and there is a freedom, for me, in letting go of these parts of the ritual.

\*

January. I google how to quit your job. Ask A Manager tells me to do it in person. I prepare. I write my script. I build my strength. Neither of my supervisors are in. I google how to quit your job email. I keep it short and sweet and give my two weeks' notice and leave the office for lunch where I buy myself a drink. I Instagram my celebration.

July. I google how to quit your job. Ask A Manager tells me to do it in person. My boss is a bully, and I am scared of her, and what she will say. She is in meetings in Sydney. I google how to quit your job email. I keep it short and terse and give my one week's notice and cc in the chair of the board, as if this witness will keep me safe. I Instagram my relief.

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I read about how much more work it is for historians working in women's history.

Women's stories were never recorded the same way men's were.

A woman was subsumed by her husband. By her children.

I start counting how many Beethoven programs will be played in Australia in 2020. I give up somewhere around a dozen.

I think about the privilege in never being forgotten.

I listen to Wendy Laura Belcher on a podcast, speaking about the history of African literature. She mentions names like Kebrá Nagast, writing in the 1200s, and Ahmad Ibn Fartuwa of Niger, writing in the 1500s, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, writing in the 1700s.

I wonder why I have never heard of these writers.

I know why.

\*

I read there are 1.5 billion more people in the world today since 2001. And I can't imagine where they would've all come from. And I can't imagine how we could've grown so much when so many people have died.

I read that over 500,000 people die every year in the UK.

I wonder how many of those people got to say goodbye – how many people got to say goodbye to those people – and how many just left.

I read that the average death impacts five people. I think: how can it be there are only five people we would need to say goodbye to? I wonder how many people have no-one to say goodbye to at the end. How many people said goodbye one day, to one person, and then went on living for years and years never having to make an exit again.

I think about how hard it is to not be able to say goodbye.

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Sometimes, my anxiety manifests so clearly in a shaking right leg. A shaking so violent that it will leave me in pain. This shaking is my body telling me to run.

I ignore it.

\*

New South Wales is on fire.

72 fires. 36 out of control.

150 houses gone.

3 people dead.

40 people injured.

7 people missing.

I think about the way people left: those who left early, those who tried to stay. Those who have moved to that part of the country so recently, those who trace their families and communities back tens of thousands of years.

I think about how many First Nations people were expelled off their land by colonialism and settler violence. And how climate change is just the latest version of this violence.

I realise I don't know the names of this country. I look it up: Biripi, Djangadi, Gumbaynggir, Ngarbal.

\*

I think about the lack of ritual in my life. In the lives of many white, Millennial, atheist Australians. About how this slither of culture I find myself in comes without ways of saying hello and goodbye. And how weddings and funerals have such strange places in this, as if we are importing ritual for one event but keep our hands clean of it the rest of the time.

\*

What if the ritual of theatre is broken? If, during *Exit Strategies*, Mish was to just leave? If an Exit Strategy was to put on a performance about exits, and ten or 20 or 34 exits in she never entered again.

If she never bowed to tell you the show was over? If she just left, and that was it? How long would it take for you to give up, to think the show had ended?

If no-one says goodbye, is anything ever over?

\*

I place my pot plants in my lap, and I snip off the leaves that are browning and dead. You have to prune your plants, because the plant doesn't necessarily realise these leaves are dead and it keeps sending energy down the stems as if there is something there that can be sustained.

Bunnings will guarantee your plants for twelve months.

A strange kind of insurance against death and loss. As long as you can keep a plant alive for less than a year, you get to replace it.

—Jane Howard is a Walkley Award-winning journalist, and Deputy editor of arts and culture at *The Conversation*.

## On Leaving and Returning Erica McCalman

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You are four, nearly five. Your grandmother and your aunt are cutting out bright yellow contact paper and covering a battered old hard walled suitcase. To make it neater they say. They explain to you your uncle is going overseas. He is going to America to be at a university. He is a Doctor. Not like one who fixes you when you are sick. Different kind. He is very smart, which is why he gets to go overseas. You decide you are going to be very smart and go to university too so you can go overseas.

She is four, nearly five. We don't know how she was taken. But we can imagine. Were there guns? There most certainly were cries of anguish, mother and daughter frantically grabbing and clutching at each other. There would have been men. Tearing them apart. We know she was taken to a household. We know the white lady gave her a new name. She is Annie now, not Yindolan. Forget that word. Practice answering to your new name. If she works hard, she can be nearly as white and good as them. She will be trained up as a maidservant. You think about the four year old girls you know. How do you break a four year old to make them submit?

You have left the suburbs. You are living near a beach, in an enclave of artists. You are in a drag bar backstage, doing shots of tequila before the show. You feel a breeze around your breasts. 'GO ON! GET ON F\*\*\*ING STAGE!' One of the performers has your satin wrap top in her hands. You call her a bitch, laugh and insist she owes you a drink. You don't know it yet, but the shadow of your great grandfather is there. He lived upstairs after crossing the Nullabor. He is going to enlist in the Air Force. He is very obviously black. You are not. You both sip your beers. He is the last person born on Country.

She is in her twenties. She is a shepherd's wife, a midwife and mother to five. The reports say her house is always spotlessly clean. Her husband arrived as a child convict, alone on a ship called *The Shepherd*. We don't know who his parents are. We know he stole a book. We know he gave her a shotgun to fire into the air if she is alone and afraid. She tells him Aboriginal people come close to her cottage

and watch. She has forgotten who she is. They remember. A shot rings out over the sky. I imagine they scatter back into the bush. I know he comes running.

You read his military file. He is shorter than you. He has a traffic fine on his record. The entry for his complexion is left blank. His postings: Laverton, Laverton, Melbourne, Laverton, Melbourne, Singapore, Malaya, Temora, Parkes, Laverton, Travancore, Laverton, Birdum, Gorrie, Darwin, Milingimbi, Milingimbi, Tocumwal, Melbourne. You check the year of enlistment. 1936. In Perth a wave of children were taken that year and beyond. Your grandfather tells you stories of growing up in Collingwood. He couldn't remember Perth then. His father never spoke of home.

I stay. I stay because I am told I am sitting with elders. I will not leave without permission. I am told I am arrogant. I am told I have used my intelligence to slip into spaces I am not wanted. I have no culture. I am a thief, I have stolen something which does not belong to me. I am told I will be watched and punished if I make a mistake or rebel. I am challenged to describe my country. I can't. They tell me I don't know who I am. They tell me I need to be fixed. By the time the tears begin falling I am shattered. I just want to go home. I don't sleep. Work has sent me far from home. This is not my family. There have never been any ancestors in this place.

The sun has risen over Sydney. I am in a warehouse sitting on concrete accompanied by an ashtray and a bottle of wine. Everyone here is an uninvited guest on this land. I have sat here for eight hours answering questions and letting people talk out their confusion and guilt. I look around. Someone is asleep on the floor. A group is dancing and swapping clothes. Everybody took drugs except me. Whoops. I am being flown to London tomorrow. I end up having parallel dimension variants of the exact same conversation from Ealing to Barking. Europe feels heavy.

Work sends me to Perth. I have 72 hours. Outside of business hours my time is my business. I have one name and a phone number. An elder, our cousin. She wants to meet in a neutral place. She is the keeper of all the family knowledge. Over a coffee she is cautious. The meeting lasts less than an hour. She wants to reassure me but I can tell she will step no further. I can see her pain, why she hesitates. She knows who I am. I am one of the ones who left and didn't look back.

I realise I am there for the wrong reasons. Looking for something she can't give me.

Pieces of information begin floating up from the depths. A colleague has seen the shepherd's name on a monument in Fremantle. Another has identified a relative wrapped up in a murder mystery on a family's farm. One colleague from out west insists on giving you a new language word to use in a sentence every time you meet. An uncle recalls playing basketball with your cousins in the 70s. An Aunt confirms. In Brisbane you are invited to sing new friends home safely with your countrymen. The words are new but familiar. Your sister, now a midwife herself, is flown in for a fleeting visit and finds more hidden threads of connection. A new friend and I are having a cup of tea at a conference 'We don't eat our own, our mob.' she says. We have the same hair.

I plunge into water, it comes up to my hips, waist, collarbones. Warm, clear, pure turquoise sheltered by palm trees and pandanus. A chalky residue lies at the bottom. The gentle current pushes me around a bend. An oasis in red desert. The sign says the water has spent aeons slowly pushing through limestone to bubble up here. The nearby town of Birdum ceased to exist soon after the war. I know he has been here. Often. We swim. We talk. The north is a respite from a lifetime of juggling two sets of obligations and ambitions. A place to cut the noise and find clarity. I am the second in my family to live in Darwin.

We all have more in common than we think. A colony wasn't built in a day: it needs labour, preferably cheap and motivated only to serving a master. The mess is the point. The grief and confusion is the point. The displacement is the point. The gap between the wealthy and the powerless is the point. Being preoccupied by chasing goals that are beside the point... is the point. We are all kept fearful and separated, carrying a wound so old we can't quite understand. It is the absence of connection. It is impossible to achieve or buy your way to healing. All of us have kin, ancestry, a spirit and a community. A place to begin the cycle of reaching out and reciprocating. Where safety and wellbeing are collectively built. Breathtaking resilience is a communal discipline. Nurture your generosity. Nurture your curiosity. Listen. Stay. There is something here to fight for. This place cannot wait for you forever.

*—Erica is a Ballardong Noongar woman with Irish Convict, Scottish and Cornish heritage. A producer, curator and mentor, her Next Wave 2018 keynote project Ritual won a Green Room Award for Innovation in Curatorial Contribution & Programming.*

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# APHIDS

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