



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 5, EPISODE 1 (January 2023)

Shipwreck Odyssey (Australian National Maritime Museum)

David Clarkson – Creative Director, Box of Birds

Tim Stackpool:

The artistic director of Shipwreck Odyssey is David Clarkson. I caught up with David in the members lounge at the Australian National Maritime Museum and asked him, first of all, about how this show first came together.

David Clarkson:

When we first started conceiving Shipwreck Odyssey, we wanted to make a piece about the oceans. One of the driving factors for me was, I guess, the environmental concerns of what's happening around the world with many issues to do with the seas, with plastic pollution, with global warming. But we wanted to tell this story in a way that wasn't didactic, that wasn't preaching to people, and was inspiring them with the love of our natural environment. So, we crafted a piece to tell a story of a shipwreck in the 1850s. A kind of old story of the Jenny Lind. Now, we came across the Jenny Lind, a very interesting ship, because so many sea stories are a bit gruesome really and there's deaths. But with the Jenny Lind, she crashed on the Great Barrier Reef. No lives were lost, and everyone stayed on a nearby coral quay and then managed to get themselves off and sail to Brisbane with no loss of life.

It was quite a positive story, which we wanted to tell, but it's still a shipwreck. Because this show was aimed at children, we wanted to create, I guess, a lighter environment for the tale, but then also that it is happening on the Great Barrier Reef, which is of course one of Australia's iconic places that is, of course, currently under threat with coral bleaching. And so, we made a story of the magical figurehead coming to life, falling deep under the ocean to the ocean trenches, and then emerging. And as she emerges, she realises the wonders and beauties of the seas. She then finally journeys back to the coral reef and observes the wonders of the coral reef, and then also witnesses its bleaching.

So then, there is a call to action, and we have one of the things that Box of Birds has developed over the last several years is an interactive system. You can make oceans move or you can make butterflies come to your hand with triggering interactive technology. During the work, we invite the audience up, they change the colour of the ocean from red to green, so they have symbolically cooled the ocean, and then that is more or less the end of the show. Jenny Lind then sails off, but then the audience is invited back to play in the space so they can make the corals bloom, they can make the water bubbles appear, they can make the phosphorescence twinkle. It's a theatre show for half an hour, and at the end, it's an interactive play space for the general public to play in.

Tim Stackpool:

It's very impressive. These screens are, what, something like 15 meters long or so?

David Clarkson:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

And, what, three metres high?

David Clarkson:

Five meters high.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow, incredible. There is that performance space in front. But this technology you're also talking about, which is interactive, the audience after the performance can actually move forward towards the screens, interact with that, and as you say, change various elements of what's being projected.

David Clarkson:

Yes. We combine a thing called Unreal Engine with interactive tracking technology that uses infrared tracking. Really, the aim of it, and I've got young kids, really, the aim of it is to create a magical play space. What I like about this technology, it takes audiences away from being passive observers to actually being able to engage. So as a theatre practitioner, I believe theatre is for everyone, and these new technologies have created play possibilities that take you off the screen, the computer screen, and allow you to physically play. You can run, you can make ocean waves roll. Yeah, I think it's a great way to get people moving and not just touch screens with their fingers.

Tim Stackpool:

As an art practitioner, of course, this opens up an enormous opportunity and potential for, as you say, greater interaction with the audience. Does the technology however detract in a way from messaging? I'm speaking generally, of course. I mean, you really are embracing the opportunity that the technology brings to tell the story. But does that also become a hindrance? Do you have to also consider what the technology perhaps can't achieve for you?

David Clarkson:

One of the things I say I often use with the use of technology is not to lose the human to the pixel. My job, as the director, is to make the humanity come through, so the technology doesn't dominate, it helps tell the story. It doesn't become the story. It's always a bit of a fine balance. But I think with so much virtual reality and augmented reality becoming more and more prevalent, I think, as a theatre artist, I tell stories particularly with the human body. And so, I think the technologies need that understanding because what it gives you is it enables you to transcend the technology or implement or incorporate the technology and not be dominated by it. So yes, I'm constantly on guard for that and it is one of the biggest challenges, but it's one I'm happy to embrace.

Tim Stackpool:

You discover a new technology or you're presented with a presentation which is astonishing and what it can achieve. And then, how does your mind work? Do you think, "How can I incorporate that into my next show"? Or do you conceptualise the project and then seek out the technology to make it work?

David Clarkson:

This journey with technology, for me, I guess, has been about the last 12 years, and I started working quite closely with the University of Technology in Sydney with creativity and cognition studios, and now, with animal logic. Really, it's been a progression. It's like any form we used to do. A lot of with Stalker Theatre, which Box of Birds has emerged from. We used to do a lot of stilt acrobatics that then kind of morphed into aerial acrobatics. You develop a form and you slowly progressively develop it.

You've got to be willing to put in the years really to get the results. So, it's not so much gratuitous one-off, okay, let's try that, I'll move on to the next thing. But it's actually a platform that you evolve and steadily develop over many years. I think that's the way you make real progress. I mean, we were lucky enough to be supported by EPIC Games recently, and I think the reason they supported us is because

they could see the body of work and the through line that was really looking at incorporating recent technology with meaningful storytelling with a wider public engagement. That's really what I'm after.

Tim Stackpool:

An incredible journey. Inside The Gallery, we often talk to curators and directors about how they've come to the point that they're at now with a particular exhibition. In terms of this work, it was commissioned how long ago? How long did it take to do the development? You had to write, you had to create the animations, as you say. I mean, you talked about EPIC Games. I mean, it really is an epic journey that you've undertaken.

David Clarkson:

With this work, I mean, every work has its own story. This, we were approached by the Australian Maritime Museum. Particularly they said, "Well, we'd like a work for the beginning of 2023. We have a shipwreck exhibition on then." They, in many ways, gave us the terms of the story, and then, it was up to me to assemble the team. I reached out to a writer, Jenevieve Chang, who I am friends with. Boris Bagattini's been working with us closely for many years now. A great animator.

Really, it was Jenevieve Chang, Boris, Maggie Breen who's a dramaturge with us, and myself. We sat around the Marrickville Library actually and brainstormed a couple of times and really started to go, "Okay, what are the shipwrecks in Australia?" We zoned in on the Jenny Lind pretty fast, because the Jenny Lind, of course, she was a famous opera singer, very theatrical, great ship, great theatrical references, great possibilities to animate a character. We could bring in song. I started thinking about the performers who have worked with us, who would be the right storyteller.

In many ways, the development of the work, the budgets aren't huge, so the development was really only a couple of months, but a lot of a year's thought and planning into who is the team and just gradually massaging through all the ingredients.

Tim Stackpool:

You have a lot of boxes to tick in putting a show together like this. Performance, engagement, education as well. Do you have to fight within yourself to make sure you maintain that balance?

David Clarkson:

It's a combination whenever you make a work between, I guess, rational thought and improvisation or emergent planning. I'm always a bit of an emergent planner. If I see a set of ingredients, I'm very good at going, yes, that one, yes, that one, not that one. Every director, I think, works differently. I work quite openly. Really, I have a fantastic team, and a lot of what I generate is goodwill amongst the company. I think that from that goodwill comes creativity. Creativity needs good soil, and that good soil is often about human relationship and freedom of expression. So, I try to encourage my team to bring out the best for their own pleasure and for everyone's pleasure hopefully.

Tim Stackpool:

There's always the point in every production, every exhibition where perhaps the curator or the director hasn't got all the components in place that they would like to have, and therefore has to make compromise. The audience doesn't miss what they don't see or what they don't know, not particularly with this production, but how often does that compromise cross your desk?

David Clarkson:

Well, I think particularly what we are dealing with is a post-COVID environment. What that means, particularly with freelance artists, is many artists have either or some artists have left the sector, or it was very hard for me to hold a team together for two years when there was no work or very little work. Particularly in the sector at the moment, the biggest loss has been around technicians. Many technicians have left or they've moved to film because it's more reliable. So, I think the biggest challenge for this show and for the last year has been actually in building teams, particularly, for me, technically, this has been a very challenge... I understand I am not a technician, but I understand the technical elements of shows very well. Yeah, that's been the particular challenge at the moment. We are creating in very unusual times.

Tim Stackpool:

It's a story that we are hearing everywhere, and it actually doesn't matter which industry or sector you're in, but the theatre and the arts is particularly disadvantaged because of the last two years, how difficult it's been. We've seen so many people, as you say, leave the sector, which has meant it's tough to stage anything. It's tough to actually achieve the work that you want to achieve. Do you think that's going to change?

David Clarkson:

I mean, I've given up trying to predict the future. I think as many of us have, we live in uncertain times. You can either embrace the uncertainty. At times, it's hard not to get depressed about it, I feel. I mean, I've been lucky in my career that I've had a lot of time in Europe, in Latin America, all through Asia. I've been part of a lot of different creative environments, and every culture has its own response to art. There are some real strengths about Australia, and there is also some weaknesses about how it responds to culture. God only knows where we're heading.

I've got young kids, I like to live in hope, and you roll with the punches. Talk to me in a year's time and we'll see. There's been some great things happened for me in the last couple of years. It hasn't been all bad by any means, and I think for many people. But yes, there are some real challenges for artists at the moment.

Tim Stackpool:

Coming back to this show, at its very basic level, we could say it's a big screen show. Australia has been subject to quite a few of these over the last 18 months even. Does this represent a level of competition that you have to be wary of when putting shows together?

David Clarkson:

Well, it's interesting. I first started conceiving these immersive works, whether they're 360 or 180 degree, probably about 10, 12 years ago. I think we were ahead of the curve. What's hard to do for what are called the small to medium sector is it's hard to raise the cash to put on the big visions, and it's really the commercial works that can come in and in some ways capture the market.

Is it the competition? I think it's all part of a spectrum really. If you worry too much about the commercial competition, especially in the small to medium sector, you never get anywhere. We had this huge non-disclosure agreement with a company in China, a \$500 million contract. Didn't come to pass. It's interesting the commercial realities of this kind of immersive work. I think I've realised we just do what we do and we have great partners and you steam ahead.

Tim Stackpool:

It's a big show. It takes a big space. Is this something that could perhaps tour to other museums, or would this be exclusive to the Australian National Maritime Museum?

David Clarkson:

I mean, most of our works tour quite widely, particularly more recently to Asia and Latin America, but we often tour to Europe. Often, you don't really know until work is made, and then we'll put it out there. It will probably tour. We made a piece for the Air Force last year, unusually for us, called Space Play. That's toured a little bit. But our show, Mountain, which we made about four, three years ago, that's toured to Latin America and Asia and around Australia. We go to Auckland in a few weeks with that. So yeah, I think the work will tour, and it'll probably go to museums or it'll go to arts festivals.

Tim Stackpool:

It's a very specific Australian work though. Does that make it difficult to transpose into other locations?

David Clarkson:

I think the world has an interest in the Great Barrier Reef, both because it is one of the natural wonders of the world and also because it is threatened. I think the only thing that will probably inhibit it touring will be some language issues. We can work with those languages. I think it's a fairly global tale we've made in an Australian context dealing with Australian iconic images. But I would hope it's a global work we've made.

Tim Stackpool:

The graphics and the imagery used in the works are spectacular, and in some ways quite frightening. Considering your audience and it is a family audience, does this come into play at all when you're thinking about this? I mean, these are monstrous, some of the images that you've got on screen.

David Clarkson:

Having kids myself, I think kids love to be moderately terrified. As long there's no graphic violence. I mean, God, I just went and saw Avatar the other day, which is fantastic, but so much use of machine gun violence. I actually think that is worse than to have a good shipwreck and hear a mast crack and get scared by it. I think that's all part of the fun. And then, five minutes later, you're surrounded by the beauty of the ocean. I guess once we've run it a few times with an audience, we'll find out if we've gone too far. I'd be surprised if we have. We might need to tone down probably even just the volume of some of the ship crash noises.

Tim Stackpool:

It is incredibly immersive actually to be in there when all this happens. The surround sound, I'm guessing, is part of the production as well. I don't know whether it's 5.1 or 7.1 or indeed it's customised.

David Clarkson:

James Brown is the composer and also the sound designer. He's done a fantastic job with a relatively limited budget. Every time I hear it, the sound gets better.

Tim Stackpool:

The contrast you talked about with the beauty of the ocean, I mean, that truly is there. The shipwreck scenes are very dramatic, very dark, thunder and lightning, all of that there. But the oceanography is just beautiful and superb. Animated, of course, but so realistic in this presentation. But beautiful. It's a great emotional release to see that.

David Clarkson:

Boris Bagattini, who is the animator, has done many, many dives. He loves the ocean, so I think it came pretty naturally to him. He was Ridley Scott's lead live animator for Alien. He works at a very high professional level. His love of the ocean has come through. And then, we have made the shift over recently with animation to work with Unreal Engine, which has given it that very realistic look. I mean, it's incredible what is possible these days with animation. You feel as though you are swimming beneath the oceans, seeing those marvels. Absolutely outstanding animation. Absolutely.

Tim Stackpool:

I'm in awe of the names you're rattling off here, it's almost as if you went about this saying, "I want to get the best people to do this, not just the best people available to do this."

David Clarkson:

I think that as much... Sydney is small in some ways, and I've been in the industry a while, and you get to know some great creative people. It's an absolute pleasure to work with them

Tim Stackpool:

We're here at the behest of the Australian National Maritime Museum, and thank you so much for the invitation to come out and have this chat. But in terms of what you are working on, what can we expect from you guys going forward?

David Clarkson:

The most recent stuff we are playing around with is augmented reality. We are working with glasses you put on, and you can have someone on the other side of the world and yourself there. We are playing around with, so you can dance with a virtual partner, or the audience can put it on and you can have people beam in from anywhere in the world and be present in the room and create a theatrical or a dance event. So, augmented reality is our next play space, but also at the same time, I'm interested in this work we're doing at the moment, I guess is in 180, but working in large dome structures to create 360 degree works with either 2D or 3D projection is what we're playing around with as well.

Tim Stackpool:

We're digressing a little bit here, but I'm interested in just following the line of you talking about using virtual reality work, which is single individuals wearing visors, which is a very personal one-on-one experience. At the other end of the scale, you've got these huge dome-like presentations too. This is such a huge contrast.

David Clarkson:

Yeah. Well, where I'm particularly interested is where you take that virtual reality experience of the single user and you make it a participatory event. I think when you make it a participatory event, it takes you out of that isolation that is so often associated with screen, and takes it into a shared communal

space, which I think is where humans are at their strongest. We are a communal animal. We need each other. We thrive on play. It's where our best thinking comes from. And so as a theatre artist, what I'm really trying to do with this technologies is take them away from the single user into a group physicalised experience. That's really what I would like to do with my craft.