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*Breaking Bread* was presented at the Wentworth Falls School of Arts in the Blue Mountains in May 2017, produced and directed by Margaret Davis under the auspices of Weatherboard Theatre Inc. and with the support of the Blue Mountains City of the Arts Cultural Trust.

Performers: Georgia Adamson, Jade Alex Fuda, Andrew McDonell, Tiriell Mora, Olivia O'Flynn, Janine Penfold, Reema Petrushev and Shane Porteous

Writers: Stephen Davis, Lisa Dowling, Ryan Patrick Devlin, Amanda Kaye, Ingle Knight, Julian Leatherdale, Aeva O'Dea and Mark O'Flynn

Central to the overall experience of this community centred event was the fabulous food created by Kim Gastermeier of Cherry Moon, who themed her ingenious menu around the food highlighted in each of the monologues.

In a theatre career stretching back to the early 70s my most satisfying creative experiences are those that centred on the intimacy of the actor/audience exchange—the kind of shared experience that is not possible on screen or in a vast auditorium with amplified sound. I have danced with the Australian Opera and directed largescale musicals, but it is the works in found spaces, focusing on powerful story telling, which have had the most profound effects on performers and audience alike.

My instinctual leanings to such an approach were formalised when in 1988 I was selected as one of eight



theatre directors to undertake intensive training with English director and acting guru, Mike Alfreds, founder of Shared Experience. Mike's techniques in narrative theatre, his rigorous approach to rehearsal with its focus on the transformative power of the actors, without reliance on spectacular technical effects, have informed my own work ever since.

And so to *Breaking Bread*. The inspiration for this project came in part from my involvement in 2015 as a writer on Sydney group Subtlenance's project, *The Table Talk Trilogy*, which embraced subjects once forbidden at polite dinner tables—Politics, Religion and Sex. The brief

## Margaret Davis, producer and director of 'Breaking Bread' describes the complex process by which eight different actor and writer teams came up with the complex and different works which formed this unusual event...

for the writers was to come up with a 10 to 12 minute monologue for an actor who was assigned to us. Genre and format were up to us, but the focus was on tailoring a piece to our own actor, based on their own experience. For me, what was most fascinating about the whole process was the communal gathering of all the writers and actors for the read through of the whole work. All the pieces were different, some quite naturalistic, others physically comedic or even surreal, but each was undeniably a reflection of the actor for whom it had been conceived.

It was this communal experience which made me think how well such a project could work within the Blue Mountains community. When I moved here four years ago, I was astonished at how quickly I found a community—new connections, yes, but also the revival of old ones—actors and directors and writers who I had worked with many moons ago. I soon became part of many gatherings, usually informal, reading and discussing each other's scripts, listening to each other's ideas and of course to breaking bread together at our shared tables. Beginning to dream up projects that might be relevant to the wider community as well. Food? Well of course! A natural theme for a communal event in the mountains, to be staged in late autumn, bringing in the harvest, stacking the firewood, chicken soup by the fire on a day where the mist never rises, the upside down Christmas dinners, scones and berry jam after a four hour bushwalk. Hot chilli chocolate and red wine. These are the themes and variations I expected when I paired up each of the eight actors with their respective writers and sent them off to create their pieces, for which they had around seven weeks.

Then, of course, came the anxiety. I was about to direct a production but had no idea of its specific content until we all met, actors and writers and director and dramaturge (the veteran May-Britt Akerholt). For a whole day we sat around a big table and the whole array of extraordinarily different pieces had their first airing. It was a day of passionate discussion, laughter, tears and a shared appreciation for the extraordinary variety of wonderful stories ready to be brought to another stage over the rehearsal period.

There was just one passing mention of scones, and then, in an uncomfortable context. No warm mountains kitchens. And although there was chocolate, it wasn't simply a source of comfort. What was present

however, was the extraordinarily complex nature of our relationship with food, in all its infinite variety. That food sustains life is a given, but what concerned us as a creative team is the food that is inextricably linked to much deeper needs—the food that lures us, promising unconditional love, to food as a weapon, toxic to body or soul.

And then, there are the simple but deadly consequences of stealing food from a hungry actor on a stressful day in a television studio...

So what were the processes by which the actor and writer teams came up with their wonderfully complex



Right: Margaret Davis addressing the audience before a performance of Breaking Bread  
Photographer Jocelyn Lawson



Andrew McDonnell in *A Life in Ten Meals*  
Photographer Nicholas McKinlay

and differing works? Some writers kept their drafts close to the material of recorded interviews; others shot off on their own imaginative tangents, while others engaged in joint improvisation sessions.

Some writer/actor couples already knew each other intimately. Novelist, playwright and poet Mark O'Flynn wrote the tragicomic piece *Airline Food* for his daughter Olivia, while screenwriter and playwright Stephen Davis penned *Borscht*, or a series of seemingly accidental digressions in an attempt to understand casual racism as a deliciously stand up routine for his wife, the wonderfully dry-witted Reema Petrusev.

But other teams met for the very first time on this project. Julian Leatherdale, best known for his recent historical novel, *'Palace of Tears'*, and veteran performer Andrew McDonnell, are a case in point. Their shared process on *A Life in Ten Meals* was the most physically active collaboration of any in the total work.

**JULIAN LEATHERDALE:** At our first meeting... I had a few scenarios in my head but Andy encouraged me to think more theatrically to open up the possibilities for story-telling beyond psychological realism and this felt liberating.... While we were

sitting outside a café a little girl ran past trailing a long stretchy thread— the image instantly inspired the idea of a life-thread that could be cut.

Following this first meeting, Andy and Julian hired a space where they could physically explore ideas, including the use of a stretchy cord tied around Andy's waist. Although the actual cord was eventually dropped, it served its purpose for both actor and writer to find the thematic means to link the "ten meals" of the piece.

**JULIAN:** Andy talked to me about the piece being told in flashback... by an old man with Alzheimer's. While I did not adopt this approach in the writing, I think the idea of each episode as a memory helped Andy find the through-line for his amazing performance!

While the material progressed through some eight drafts, there are some elements that arrived complete and remained unchanged, including Julian's beautifully structured, but extremely black Shakespearean sonnet addressed to diabetes! But Julian was extremely enthusiastic about the chance discoveries the workshop process uncovered:

**JULIAN:** At our second workshop, I brought along a very rough first draft of *A Life In Ten Meals*. We played word association games and did improv exercises together. Many bits of monologue and action improvised by Andy ended up in the final draft so in that sense it was a truly collaborative process. The workshops also provided time and space for Andy and I to learn to trust each other and dig deeper for emotional truth in the writing and performance.

My job in directing this work was to focus the performer on the emotional and physical detail, particularly during the transitions in the story—from baby to little boy to stoned adolescent and so on—all of which relied solely on the physicality of the performer to make the changes in both himself and his environment clear and engaging.

And as the piece did indeed depict a whole life and its interdependence at every age with a particular food obsession, there was no question that this would be the opening piece of the whole work.

(Note: While the writer Julian Leatherdale has supplied all the quotes in this section, actor Andrew McDonnell has added: "Thanks Julian, I'll just ride on your articulate coat tails once more and concur. Well said as always.")

While *A Life in Ten Meals* drew on aspects of the performer's own life, Aeva O'Dea went to the heart of the matter in her piece for actor Janine Penfold, *Off Plste*. Not only the central experience but the manner in which the actor initially told her story to the writer has been closely replicated.

I asked Aeva if this "verbatim" approach to the material was there from the start.

AEVA: It wasn't a conscious decision. I started with the raw transcript of the interview and started from there. I was so fascinated by the natural rhythms of the verbatim material that I used that as a springboard and began shaping and writing from there, using the original text as a guide.

With Janine's permission, Aeva recorded all of their meetings, but Janine was initially taken aback by the rhythms of the written work.

JANINE: I didn't fully realise how I spoke and that I sometimes would repeat myself. But this ended up being a powerful dramatic tool. It took a while to work it in but it enabled me to show this was not an easy story to tell or perhaps easy for the audience to hear.

The subject of *Off Piste* was a confronting one, both for the performer and the Audience.

JANINE: I was so clear that the bulimia story was the one I wanted to deal with.... I was, initially, nervous about sharing some of the details— [but] I completely trusted Aeva and what she was creating. So many years had passed since these experiences that it was fairly easy to be detached from them but also be able to evoke them in performance.

In shaping the material, Aeva also brought in the structure of a fairytale, which meant that the piece was not purely verbatim, but had added impact through its correspondence with a well-known story-telling framework.

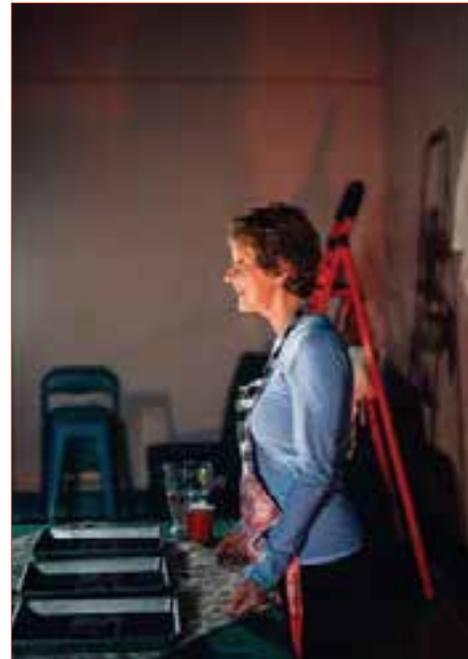
AEVA: The idea came from Janine telling me she used to count what she ate... also there was something in the way Janine was repeating words that tied into the counting and repetitions that occur in fairytales. And once that emerged for me all the elements of the story I was grappling with fell into place.

The rehearsal period was occasionally taxing for Janine as there was a lot of physical re-enactment used to set up multiple locations and characters, as well as confronting the fear of sharing such a personal story. Yet her summation was positive:

JANINE: I loved the whole experience. I just felt so privileged to have this story written for me and would put my hand up again if the opportunity arises.

The age of the artists involved in *Breaking Bread* ranged from early 20s to mid 70s, and in several cases a younger writer was paired with a more mature performer. Ryan Patrick Devlin was paired with veteran comic actor Tiriél Mora to develop *Wild Oyster*, which was by turns comic and gently elegiac in its riffing on an adolescent rite of passage.

In contrast the audience favourite *Onions* was created for young performer Jade Fuda by the more senior Amanda Kaye, a skilled short-story writer working in the theatre medium for the first time. Jade and Amanda floundered a little at first to find a story from Jade's own life that evinced enough conflict and tension to



Janine Penfold in *Off Piste* by Aeva O'Dea  
Photographer Nicholas McKinlay

sustain a ten minute drama. After several meetings and a flurry of email exchanges, Amanda crafted a fictional monologue that nevertheless embodied several elements from Jade's own life.

JADE: Amanda emailed me a list of final ideas fuelled by our conversations—one of them being *Onions*. I was immediately taken by the concept—the drama, the ups and downs of dating an actor and a lovely link to my Italian heritage and my love of food.

Amanda herself is a passionate cook and author of a food blog, so it wasn't a great surprise that the coup de théâtre that delighted audiences in *Onions* was the preparation and cooking of onions live on stage. The device informed all the layers (pun intended!) of this tale by the character's devoted love for, and ultimate betrayal by, her Shakespearean co-star. The chopping of onions and caramelising them in olive oil, balsamic vinegar, herbs and garlic celebrated the character's indulgence in all the palate-tingly foods her fast-food-loving ex had hated. As she downed a glass of white and wielded her cutting knife, the actress simultaneously replicated her onstage fire as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* while exposing her ex-lover's



Jade Fuda in *Onions*, by Amanda Kaye.  
Photographer Nicholas McKinlay

preference for the ersatz over the real in his relationships as well as food.

While I anticipated a lot of our rehearsal time on *Onions* would be spent timing the chopping and cooking to fit the turning points in the monologue, I was delighted to find how easily it all fell into place – though this was in large part due to Jade’s diligence in practising the mechanics in her own kitchen!

JADE: I spent a lot of time outside rehearsals just being comfortable with my props and actions before I began adding the emotional layers. This was great because it meant when I was in the rehearsal room with Maggie I could focus on the storytelling. I found that the physical act of cooking really helped me find my emotional journey as I could connect ideas to the things I was doing, be transported by the smell of onions and play with my inner and outer tempos.

Rehearsals on each piece began with a three-way session with writer, actor and director. After this, it was up to the writer whether they attended more rehearsals, to which they were always welcome, or stayed in touch via email about the progress of their piece. Due to other work commitments Amanda did not see

*Onions* in rehearsal, and described seeing her work performed for the first time as “a really lovely moment”.

AMANDA: Jade was brilliant in the role—smoothly shifting gears from sentimental to furious, sassy to philosophical in a way that felt believable. Her comic timing was spot on and she made the piece way better than I imagined it could be. And witnessing the audience’s pleasure in watching Jade’s performance sweetened the experience for me as well. I enjoyed the collaboration and the transformation that happens between the page and the stage.

With such a large team of artists assembled well in advance of rehearsals, I expected there could be drop-outs due to other work commitments. This was almost, but not quite the case for in-demand actor Georgia Adamson, who needed to meet up with her writer, experienced playwright Ingle Knight, well ahead of the project starting date as she was reprising her lead role in the Sydney Theatre Company’s *The Secret River* for the Adelaide Festival. Ingle’s piece for Georgia, *Just Desserts*, of necessity had less direct interaction between writer/performer than the other works during the development stage, and also less of an exploratory process in the rehearsal room. Nevertheless it was a strongly characterised piece in performance, revolving around an inherited recipe for a deceptively sweet sauce.

As the pieces developed in rehearsal, I also had to come up with a running order that would reflect the most satisfying experience for an audience. Initial ideas of moving from antipasti through several courses to dessert were quickly dropped in favour of emotional or stylistic juxtapositions which would allow for the whole eight pieces to carry us on a single intriguing journey. There were also restrictions in term of coincidental similarities—two pieces which culminated in heart attacks, for example, needed to be kept well apart. It was one of these pieces, *Soap Sandwiches*, that eventually formed the climax to the whole work.

The actor/writer combination, between Irish born-and-bred fiction writer Lisa Dowling, and veteran stage and screen performer Shane Porteous, proved to be one of the most felicitous partnerships in the production, though initially there were considerable difficulties. Shane wanted to make the climactic event a death that just may have occurred on the set of the long running TV series *A Country Practice*, in which he played the lead doctor, Terence Elliot, for over a decade. This, however, was the first stumbling block:

LISA: I grew up in a different culture to the one I was writing about and felt like I was potentially the only person who would see the piece that did not have a familiarity with the main character [or the original show]. In order to make fiction from perceived fact I needed to create the story world where the events happened.

Lisa’s research involved spending hours in the bath, watching reruns of the ‘80s show on her ipad suspended from a towel rail. Then, with detailed help from Shane on the workings of a TV studio as well as the layout for a script, she created an entire fictitious episode for the series as background for both the real and fictional

characters and events she embodied in the final piece. This led to such a degree of authenticity in the finished work that audience members rushed home to google the supposed episode in which an obnoxious guest actor suffers a fatal heart attack, with Shane's character just possibly being complicit in his demise.

In this Lisa and Shane met all of their intentions as regards plausibility of both character and situation:

LISA: The piece aimed to make the audience believe both that the death could have happened and that the protagonist could have had more than an accidental role in it, that "Shane" the character was describing real events that took place in a real TV set while filming an actual episode of a well-known TV series. We wished to flip the public perception of the real character behind a wellknown acted character.

Lisa recorded all her meetings with Shane and also incorporated his speech rhythms and idiosyncrasies in her final work, though ever the stickler for detail, Shane kept tweaking at the piece, with Lisa's permission, right up to the final week of rehearsals.

It was a more than fitting conclusion to the production to watch the audience absolutely charmed by the ingenuous style of Shane's narrative persona, and to take his side against his lunch-stealing nemesis, only to find themselves wondering whether they were really witnessing a delayed testimony to a crime, or at the very least, a cover-up.

When asked if this was the first time in his more than fifty years performing that he'd been "an actor out alone" SHANE replied:

This is the first time anyone has written a piece of theatre for me. And my first monologue. I've done long uninterrupted speeches in plays before, but never alone on stage addressing the audience as a second "character". It felt quite special, an honour.



Shane Porteous in Soap Sandwiches, by Lisa Dowling. Photographer Nicholas McKinlay

The season of Breaking Bread, provided a first-of-its-kind experience for the Blue Mountains and sold out its short season before it opened, and hopefully will lead to more forays into this celebratory form of theatre. Audiences were predominantly local, but also included visitors from Sydney and interstate. Praise for the production, the writing, performances and the food have been unanimously positive.



Breaking Bread Prologue, fullcast: L to R: Olivia O'Flynn, Andrew McDonell, Georgia Adamson, Shane Porteous, Janine Penfold, Reema Petrushev, Tiriela Mora, Jade Fuda. Photographer Nicholas McKinlay