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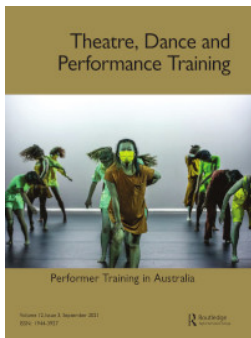
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# Supporting the performance of Noongar language in *Hecate*

Clint Bracknell , Kylie Bracknell, Susan Fenty Studham  
and Luzita Fereday

As the first adaptation of a complete Shakespearean work presented entirely in one Aboriginal language of Australia, *Hecate* is a landmark production in Australian theatre. The Noongar language of the southwest of Western Australia is a critically endangered language impacted by colonisation since the early 1800s and suppressed until the 1970s. Working with an all-Noongar cast learning what is by birthright their mother-tongue, the Noongar language, on a full Shakespearean work presents a range of challenges. Consideration of effective rehearsal strategies to support brave spaces for the cast to flourish holistically, both as language learners and performers, was imperative. As most of the cast had limited understanding of spoken Noongar language until working on the production, song functioned as a catalyst for language learning, working as a mnemonic device. Vocal exercises were introduced to empower the performers to articulate freely and to liberate the text. Additionally, the stage manager's comprehension of Noongar language was important, particularly as the production transferred to the stage. In reflecting on the necessarily unique processes developed for *Hecate*, this paper offers strategies to support future training of performers, directors, vocal coaches and stage managers engaged in productions that involve Indigenous and/or endangered languages.

**Keywords:** Noongar language, Australian theatre, performer vocal training, brave spaces, director and stage manager training

## Introduction

Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company's 2020 production of *Hecate* was groundbreaking. The first Shakespearean work to be performed entirely in one Aboriginal language from Australia, this Noongar language adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* had its world premiere in Perth, Western Australia, and was hailed a landmark production (Figure 1). Every performance elicited a standing ovation and the first audience was predom-



**Figure 1.** *Hecate* in performance. © Dana Weeks, reproduced with permission.

antly comprised of local Noongar people (ORIC 2020). This paper explores the creation of the production, including the development, rehearsal and performance phases, with a focus on sharing respectful learning processes, and offers strategies to support future training of performers, directors, vocal coaches and stage managers engaged in productions that involve Indigenous and/or endangered languages. While the information provided is specific to working with Noongar performers, this case study can be used as a guide to working in similar contexts. We include the author/collaborators' backgrounds, specifics of the Noongar language, effects and trauma associated with colonisation and language suppression, approaches to language learning and vocal training in a theatrical context and how this was facilitated by process, and development of unique rehearsal and performance strategies that transformed the environment from safe to brave in support of the performers, creative team and audiences.

For transparency, we begin by detailing the background of the authorship team, both in relation to the *Hecate* project, and in terms of cultural positioning. We speak from diverse perspectives and collaborate here in a way that explores this unique production, with language as the central focus. The journey of language learning will reveal many avenues of investigation; however, for the purposes of this article we focus on the learning processes, including the intricacies of the *Hecate* case study and detailing recommendations for future training and collaboration. We will explore ways to navigate endangered language learning – and the associated trauma, courage and hope – in the theatrical process, and conclude with strategies to create brave spaces for a learning exchange through creative processes.

## About the authors

Adaptor, co-translator and director Kylie Bracknell (née Farmer) Kaarljilba Kaardn was born in Perth, Western Australia in 1980, but spent her formative years in the country town of Pingelly before returning to Perth as a teenager. With strong maternal connection to the Perth metropolitan, Wheatbelt and Great Southern regions of Western Australia, Kylie began her performing arts career as a trainee with Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company in 1997 and received close counsel from senior Noongar language speakers – particularly her grandmothers – after being spurred into deeper learning about language and culture by her late grandfather Donald Farmer. Over her twenty-year career in the performing arts, Kylie had previously performed as an actor in two Shakespearean productions. More importantly, she supported senior speakers to present Noongar language classes as part of Perth Festival in 2005 and hosted *Waabiny Time* (2009–2012) Australia's first national children's television program in an Aboriginal language (Noongar).

The collaboration between Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company Artistic Director Kyle J. Morrison and Kylie led to the development and presentation of *Sonnets in Noongar*, a selection of Shakespeare's sonnets in the Noongar language as part of the World Shakespeare Festival at the Globe Theatre in London in 2012, setting the stage for a larger project to translate *Macbeth* – the result being *Hecate*. The success of the *Sonnets in Noongar* project was in large part due to Kylie understanding not only what was required for word-to-word translation of Shakespeare into Noongar language, but also the adaptation of the Shakespearean subtext into a Noongar production. *Sonnets in Noongar* was a common ground for all of the authors of this article, as we each experienced them from different perspectives during hometown showings at Perth in the summer of 2013. It was the Noongar language that brought us together. Kylie's initial work on *Hecate* as adapter and translator expanded, with her taking up the mantle of director and building an ensemble and creative team to support Morrison's original vision – a holistic Noongar retelling of a full Shakespearean work.

Composer, sound designer, musical director, and co-translator Clint Bracknell was born in Albany, Western Australia at the dawn of the 1980s, with maternal Noongar connection along the southern coastline between Bremer Bay and Esperance. Like many Noongar people in that region and era, he had little exposure to Noongar as a spoken language. Clint took an active interest from the late 1990s, increasingly sitting with Noongar speakers to listen and slowly collect language material. A former high school music teacher, he began an academic career in late 2010, completing a PhD study in early 2016 on the aesthetics of Noongar singing traditions. Clint was initially invited to compose songs for *Hecate* in 2016 based on his prior work with Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company. The significant challenge Kylie faced in adapting and translating Shakespeare's *Macbeth* required that Clint also be drafted in as co-translator in 2019. As a creative practitioner and researcher, Clint considers his position to be in a constant state of flux and subject to various advantages,

constraints, and responsibilities associated with simultaneously belonging to the Noongar community, the arts community and the academy (Bracknell 2015).

Stage manager Susan Fenty Studham was born in New York. Her formative years were spent in a multicultural environment in the 1960s and 70s, and her cultural grounding was through family, embracing the traditions of migrant Italians and Norwegians in the Staten Island borough of New York City. Susan moved to Western Australia in the mid 1990s, and was soon stage managing shows with Aboriginal casts who generously and patiently introduced her to the cultural traditions of Western Australia. She positions herself as a reflexive practitioner-researcher who works to understand many aspects of culture and equity in theatre. On the invitation of Morrison, Susan heard *Sonnets in Noongar* during the 2013 Perth Festival. On this occasion, the sonnets were presented in the open-air theatre at the University of Western Australia. Susan recalls:

My head buzzed with the vibrations of sounds I'd not experienced before, providing an immediate visceral response to the experience. I didn't know the exact translation of what was being communicated, but it did not matter. The tone of voice, emotion, body language and Noongar words in concert conveyed everything I needed to know.

Soon after, Morrison shared his vision of a full-length translation of a Shakespearean play. Based on Susan's stage management work collaborating with Clint (composer/sound designer) on Melody Reynold's 2018 play *Skylab* presented by Yirra Yaakin and Black Swan State Theatre, Kylie invited her to become more intimately involved with *Hecate* in mid-2019. *Hecate* was then in its third script development period, and the creative team and extended company in Perth warmly welcomed Susan, then in Chicago, via an online platform. She recalls that 'watching the progress of the opening scenes, I once again experienced a visceral response to the language, and was overwhelmed by gratitude for the privilege of being invited to join this company for this incredibly important and historical moment'.

Voice and dialect coach Luzita Fereday met and collaborated with Clint Bracknell on the Black Swan State Theatre Company production *Water* in 2019. This brief but successful working partnership led to Clint and Kylie inviting Luzita to contribute to *Hecate*. Following initial excitement at being invited to participate in the production, the key question that occurred to Luzita was how could a non-Indigenous voice and dialect coach not familiar with the Noongar language contribute? Voice and dialect coaching usually means working with actors individually and processes can vary from production to production, adapting to the needs of the individual actor in any given context. Born to English parents in Indonesia in the 1960s and living there until age 17, Luzita is a fluent speaker of Bahasa Indonesia, and speaks basic French and Spanish.

Despite her lack of familiarity with the Noongar language, Luzita's expertise in familiarising herself with non-English-speaking sounds and exploring linguistic features would help actors identify the required

articulatory sound shifts. Managing actor effort is another aspect of voice coaching, as when listening to an actor speak in a new dialect there needs to be an economy of effort and ease, so that it does not detract from the performance. Casey and Syron assert that, acknowledging Indigenous culture's place in contemporary theatre can be challenging for the non-Indigenous theatre practitioner, as the use of traditional material requires research, consultation with, and permission from traditional owners (2005, 106).

Luzita relied on a high level of consultation with Kylie and Clint, waiting on the outskirts of the production until being invited into the space once the actors were in the theatre and in tech week. Based on reviewing audio recordings that Clint offered, Luzita would listen to the actors and then diagnose where the sound shifts were inconsistent or needed a subtle adjustment.

### **Noongar: an endangered language**

Noongar of the south west of Western Australia constitute one of Australia's largest Aboriginal cultural blocs, both in terms of population and a vast estate of lands and waters which includes the capital city of Perth, the city of Albany, and the town of Esperance. Noongar as a people share a common ancestral language with various regional dialects (Bracknell 2017). As the first Aboriginal group in Western Australia to experience sustained foreign contact and British invasion, Noongar bore the brunt of land theft, frontier violence, and the dislocation from homelands and family resulting from successive government policies of segregation and assimilation (Haebich 2018). Despite staggering odds, Noongar find ways to continue to sing and speak in Noongar language. *Hecate* is indebted to broader longstanding efforts throughout community to share, revitalise and maintain Noongar language. Over 30,000 people identify as Noongar and while Australian Census data suggests that less than two per cent of that number speak the language at home, this number has grown exponentially in every Census since 1996 as a result of continued efforts since the 1980s (Bracknell 2017). Noongar language is all around us in the names of local towns, suburbs, flora and fauna. Around five hundred Noongar words and exclamations that float through the community, archival wordlists, and old audio recordings all huddle together to tell this version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Under the guidance of editor and senior Noongar language teacher Dr Roma Yibiyung Winmar and with the encouragement of other senior language speakers, translators Kylie Bracknell and Clint Bracknell worked together to craft *Hecate* with the utmost care and attention to detail.

### **Approaches and challenges**

Globally, *Hecate* is not unique in its use of Shakespeare as a vehicle for local agendas, especially in contexts of language endangerment (Dionne and Kapadia 2008). The 2002 film *Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti* was

based on a 1945 te reo Māori translation of *The Merchant of Venice* and produced to bolster Māori language revitalisation. The only other Australian work to date with an all-Indigenous cast prior to *Hecate* – Malthouse Theatre’s *The Shadow King* (2013) – included dialogue in English, Yumpla Tok (Torres Strait Creole), Kala Lagow Ya (Torres Strait Creole), Gupapuynga (Yolngu), Katherine Kriol and Baard in a pan-Indigenous mélange under the watch of a non-Indigenous director. Prior to that, 1999 saw the production of three Shakespearean works in Australia in which Indigenous actors constituted at least half of the cast: *As You Like It* (Company B), *Romeo and Juliet in Black and White* (Bell Shakespeare) and *Romeo and Juliet* (La Boite and Kooemba Jdarra). All these productions were presented in English and in varying degrees evoked Spivak’s (1990) ideas around Indigenous peoples acquiring power via mastery of colonial texts. Spurred on by performances of Shakespearean work in nearly fifty languages from across the globe that he witnessed in 2012, Morrison’s initial vision for a *Macbeth* completely in Noongar language demanded that it not be a direct translation, but something new. Rather than taking an Aboriginal position in relation to ‘non-Aboriginality’ (Dodson 1994, 9), the aim was to imbue *Hecate* with a distinctly regional Noongar aesthetic.

Kylie Bracknell’s resulting adaptation and co-translation<sup>1</sup> juxtaposes Shakespearean and Noongar ideas about femininity and Country.<sup>2</sup> In addition to addressing challenges associated with the script and story, significant community development work needed to be undertaken not only in forming a Noongar ensemble who could perform in the Noongar language, but also in ensuring that senior Noongar language speakers were respected and supportive of the project. To develop the necessary ensemble of Noongar language speakers, Kylie Bracknell facilitated biannual, week-long workshops in the decade leading up to *Hecate* with over fifteen Noongar performers participating. None of the Noongar performers were fluent Noongar language speakers, nor had all performers heard the language spoken in conversational context. Kylie Bracknell explains:

The Noongar language has not been taught strongly enough in our Noongar community for it to flow down to the younger generations to use in everyday conversation. Sadly, past government policies actively suppressed the Noongar language. As many community members attest, our elders were flogged for using it. (Bracknell 2016)

The workshops thus offered a space for the performers, as well as invited senior language speakers, to engage with and ‘heal from the inter-generational trauma associated with Aboriginal language loss’ (Bracknell 2016), and begin a new journey of reclaiming the language together as an ensemble.

The importance of the performers understanding and speaking Noongar for themselves cannot be understated – they were required not simply to repeat the Noongar lines but to engage with each other on stage in Noongar and, pragmatically, to be aware of their cue lines and be able to respond, in any moment of performance, to unintentional

1 *Hecate* was co-translated by Kylie Bracknell and Clint Bracknell with editorial guidance from Roma Yibiyung Winmar.

2 In Aboriginal speaking contexts, the capitalised term ‘Country’ signifies ‘nourishing terrain’ (Rose 1996, 1), alive and intertwined with cultural identities and knowledge systems.



variations from the scripted text. Unintentionally mirroring the approach of language immersion programs in New Zealand and Hawaii (May 2013), Kylie Bracknell instigated a 'Noongar only' hour for each workshop day, in which participants could only interact using the Noongar language. Kylie describes how 'at the very beginning of this project, these tough exercises would bring a fair bit of silence to the room for sixty minutes or more. Now, it's hard to get sixty seconds of quiet time amongst them, and that brings joy to my heart' (Bracknell 2016). These 'Noongar only' hours, one of the most challenging activities of the development of *Hecate*, would often trigger discomfort amongst performers; part of the function of the workshops as a healing sanctuary was to provide the time and space for thought and group discussion in order to develop courage.

A range of senior Noongar language speakers and people from the Noongar community were also invited to visit the ensemble during the 'Noongar only' hours, although few accepted the challenge of speaking only in Noongar for a full hour. Instead, the senior language speakers participated by offering phrases and words before the commencement of the hour for the performers to try out, and joined the group discussion in reflecting on the difficulty of refraining from speaking English after having it imposed on our lives for so long. To face and overcome this challenge, the performers had to rely on each other during the 'Noongar only' hour to communicate, and much like the effect of group singing, this reliance strengthened both the ensemble and the bonds between the ensemble and the senior language speakers – thus solidifying a stronger Noongar language speaking community.

### **Song as a catalyst**

When *Hecate* was still in its workshop phase, Clint Bracknell developed a handful of Noongar language songs for the production based on reinterpreted Shakespearean text and Noongar song conventions (Bracknell 2017). As early as 2017, before the final cast was selected, everybody participating in the workshops would learn and repeat the songs. Singing allowed for group participation in the workshop phase, thereby helping to overcome the 'shame factor' often associated with learning one's Aboriginal language (Bell 2013). Most of the group considered the songs pivotal in their development as Noongar speakers and, even after the production, they still remember and sing them. Singing in a previously unknown language promotes and reinforces proper pronunciation – arguably the most difficult skill to acquire in language learning (Techmeier 1969). Melody singing is widely acknowledged as an effective language learning tool, enhancing an 'awareness of sounds, rhythms, pauses, and intonations' (Fonseca Mora 2000, 152). The *Hecate* songs assisted in developing the particular vocal articulations required to perform in Noongar language.

Songs also leave a 'particularly deep trace in our memories' (Fonseca Mora 2000, 150). Given the importance of song in Noongar society (Bracknell 2020), the act of learning Noongar songs functioned on multiple levels. Some *Hecate* songs were able to be memorized quickly,

increasing confidence amongst performers to be able to get 'off book' in the process of text memorisation. Other songs were more difficult to learn and, once mastered, provided both a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of closer connection to Noongar singing traditions and singers of the past. Although some argue that a 'language cannot be saved by singing a few songs' (Ellis and Mac a 'Ghobhainn 1971, 144), these outcomes demonstrate how mnemonic qualities of song can assist in invigorating and sustaining language acquisition (Miyashita and Shoe 2009; Murphey 1990). The use of song in Aboriginal language maintenance activities, including teaching children and adults Aboriginal languages, has proven to be popular and reasonably effective in Australia (see Amery 2001; Anderson 2010; Green 2010; Sometimes and Kelly 2010; Maier 2010; Rijavec 2010; Edwards and Hobson 2013). Communal singing in workshops and then rehearsals increased feelings of connectedness in the group – everyone was in it together.

### Safe to brave spaces

After years of workshops to build language capacity within the Noongar performing arts community while concurrently adapting the script, the formal production process for *Hecate* was divided into four phases: two three-week studio rehearsal periods, a two-week technical rehearsal/pre-view period, and the performance season. The core group consistently in daily rehearsals included director Kylie Bracknell, nine Noongar cast members including Kyle J. Morrison, Yamatji<sup>3</sup> movement director Janine Oxenham, and stage manager Susan Fenty Studham. As the only non-Aboriginal member of this core group, Susan's pre-existing positive working relationship with Morrison, Clint Bracknell, and other cast members allowed the company to feel confident in sharing any discomfort or challenges and trusted her to support them in this process.

As a professional stage manager of 36 years, Susan's role included fostering creative, inclusive environments for theatrical processes to thrive. In the European tradition, the stage manager is responsible for the smooth running of a performance and acts as a hub of communication throughout the rehearsal and performance processes. They prepare for the rehearsal process through organisation of paperwork and of the rehearsal room, contact the performing artists, and are considered the conduit into the rehearsal space, following specific protocols that are generally guided by pre-agreed upon contracts and rulebooks. The stage manager maintains the structure of the rehearsals, anticipates and plans for technical rehearsals, communicates with all departments through daily schedules and reports, and works to maintain a rehearsal space that allows for safety assurances for performing artists and theatre makers. Using recent nomenclature, this last task might be described as creating a 'safe space'.

Safety can be interpreted in many ways. Physical, emotional and cultural safety are incredibly important, particularly around reclaiming and relearning the Noongar language, the company's own 'mother tongue'. The term *safe space* is fraught since it does not allow for discomfort in

3 The northern neighbouring Aboriginal cultural bloc to the Noongar region.

any way (Studham 2021). Perhaps a more accurate descriptor is *brave space*. Following the work of Arao and Clemens, brave spaces allow the company to sit with discomfort, where risks can be taken enabling a more authentic conversation. The intent is that the participants remain physically and emotionally unharmed. They posit that the term 'brave space' may more aptly describe the practice of safely fostering challenging dialogue (Arao and Clemens 2013). This might consider the challenges of the text or script, many of which would arguably be considered dangerous. Chicago playwright Isaac Gomez identifies brave spaces as those which set up a framework for more respectful discourse with a group agreement that allows for intention, as opposed to impact, allowing a space 'to be transformed from safe to brave' (Studham personal interview with Gomez in 2019). A simple definition of a brave space is 'a space where we can sit with discomfort but can also look after each other's well-being' (Studham 2021, 73).

Aligning with this idea of brave spaces, in early 2012 Kylie Bracknell identified the imperative need for each Noongar actor to be given support to sit with discomfort. While 'the loss of language does not always signal the loss of identity' (Walsh and Yallop 1993, 11), the loss of language is nevertheless keenly felt across the community. Reclaiming one's endangered language in any context, let alone in performance, is an act of bravery. Every stage of the production risked triggering trauma associated with colonisation and language loss, especially when combined with pressure on the cast to perform in a recently-learned second language as if it were their first.

Therefore, from a procedural perspective, in order to respectfully run the rehearsal room, Susan was compelled to re-assess European-based processes and embrace a more Noongar-centric approach attuned to supporting the cast in relation to these potential dangers, with encouragement from Kylie. In some instances, the biggest challenge in these delicate moments was not to respond directly – which might risk impressions of paternalism – but to listen and hold space. During every *Hecate* development workshop, at least one performer would experience a performance block due to grief over language loss. Fostering a courageous or brave space allowed for flexibility to respond to daily triggers experienced by the cast over the entirety of the formal production process. This was essential for *Hecate*. Director Kylie Bracknell proactively initiated a *dordong waangk* (circle talk) at various stages of the rehearsal process. The circle became a trusted space for cast and creatives to collectively voice and address any discomfort. The talking circles were held in rehearsal rooms or sometimes outside on *boodjar* – Country – in response to the need in the moment. *Dordong waangk* became such an integral part of the production process that it was formally included in daily rehearsal schedules in the second phase of rehearsals, and in technical rehearsals as nerves became heightened for the cast.

### **Noongar maya-waangkiny (Noongar sound-talking)**

When it came to speaking in the Noongar language, Susan shares that

In the initial days of rehearsals, I asked for clarification on my own use of language in the rehearsal room. While I was invited to learn the Noongar language, I felt nervous that it would be disrespectful, and shy to verbalise words, since I did not know if my pronunciation was accurate. I was pleasantly surprised to find that I had an understanding of a limited amount of verbal and non-verbal communication from decades of interaction with the Noongar community. As the weeks progressed, I worked at achieving a passive understanding of the language.

This understanding and interpretation of language extended beyond the spoken word to kinesics and paralanguage, all understood as integral aspects of communication (Sidtis and Kreiman 2013). Language is contextual, and non-verbal communication is a significant component of conveying meaning across languages (Studham 2015). The non-verbal must be accepted as a crucial element of language when considering the interdependency of dialogue and what is interpreted, as reflected in Mikael Bakhtin's concept of dialogic overtones:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing [...] language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's [...] Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. (Bakhtin 1981, 294)

There is much to consider in this area, including the propensity to misinterpret meanings embedded in language and the politics of word choices; for brevity, we here move on to the practicalities of learning the Noongar verbal language.

Amongst other factors, the paucity of spoken Noongar language resources available online has led the global language reference publication *Ethnologue* to list the Noongar language as extinct (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2020). While a Noongar language orthography was developed in the early 1990s (Whitehurst 1992), written Noongar cannot convey nuances of emphasis and delivery. As a senior language speaker, Dr Roma Yibiyung Winmar was an invaluable advisor to the entire company throughout the processes of translating, adapting and rehearsing. In lieu of speaking with Noongar speakers like Yibiyung on a daily basis, audio recordings were invaluable in the cast's endangered language learning journey. In a necessary step to support the cast to learn lines, in December 2019 Clint Bracknell and Kylie Bracknell read and recorded audio of the script, sharing it with the company via an online platform during the early rehearsal period. This spoken Noongar reference audio – accessible on their personal devices – acted as a springboard from which the cast honed their performances.

As the company became more confident with the Noongar language, discussions within rehearsals began to incorporate more Noongar vocabulary daily. This created more of an urgency for the stage manager to understand the language in order to keep up with the development of

the show, respond to off-book comments, and notate intention, blocking and technical cues to ensure adequate use of rehearsal time and progress on the production. Reflecting on those initial days, Susan found that

As the stage manager, I began to find myself falling behind in the interpretation of what was happening in the room, and worked to learn the meaning of more words and phrases. It should also be noted that the pronunciation of words and the rules of the written text did not always make sense when reading from a Western/English-speaking perspective, so concentrated attention was essential when following the script.

One of several exhausting days of the process as a stage manager was the day the company was challenged to be 'off book' for Act I, which was in the first rehearsal period in December. Given the actors would not be carrying their scripts, common theatre protocol dictates that the stage manager 'on book' would call out any forgotten lines to prompt the actors to continue. On the first day of prompting, rehearsals came to a halt as the actors did not understand the stage manager's accent or pronunciation. Keeping up with the text at this early stage and not getting lost in the script was exhausting work. It was not until weeks into the process that Susan reported consciously acknowledging the difficulties of working between two languages, one that she was learning and not up to the same level as the cast. She commented that she had underestimated the work and energy involved.

### **Vocal training**

During her research for *Hecate*, Luzita Fereday investigated common linguistic features of Aboriginal languages, along with descriptions of Noongar language phonology and the placement of sounds in the mouth (Whitehurst 1992; Douglas 1996). Despite the positive outcomes of recent language revitalisation efforts (Walsh 2001), the number of speakers of Aboriginal languages in Australia generally remains in decline. Simpson and Wigglesworth state, 'for a language to be considered strong, it needs to be spoken across all generations, and most importantly, it needs to be the, or one of the, languages children are learning from birth' (2019, 71). Noongar is far from being considered a strong language in this regard. Consequently, the Noongar language ability within the cast of nine Noongar actors varied from very little language fluency to some knowledge of the language spoken through familial and community exchanges and gatherings. On the whole, all the actors had English as their first language, while spoken Noongar was a second or third language for them. Because of some of their underlying generations of family speaking the Noongar language, they were already familiar with some of the articulatory and placement features of Noongar. Clint described the placement of sounds as being like chewing gum in the back of the mouth, and this was a useful and helpful image for the actors. The successful articulation of the different Noongar sounds was particularly evident with

the vowel sounds, which were accurate and consistent, especially as there are a smaller number of vowels than in English.

The majority of the actors in *Hecate* had received training in conservatoire settings. Of the nine actors, four hold certificates in Aboriginal Performance from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), and two earned Bachelor degrees, at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) respectively. Having taught three of the actors at WAAPA helped build trust between Luzita and the cast. At the time she stepped into the rehearsal space, the collaborative dynamic between the Noongar director, musical director and actors, the Yamatji movement director, and the New York stage manager had already developed over a long timeframe.

Sounds common to Aboriginal languages had historically been ‘flogged out of’ Aboriginal people (Walker 1988, 4) and it is well established that ‘traditional approaches to accent training favour the white middle-class somatic norm and dominant listening ear within the performing arts’ (Oram 2020, 17). Most of the *Hecate* cast had trained and performed in English-language theatre for many years and so were adept at producing the forward-projected, front-of-mouth sounds expected in that context (Tan 2012; Connor 2014; Ginther 2015), but were still finding their voice in Noongar. Having listened to the audio recordings of the script made by Clint and Kylie, Luzita sought to distinguish which of the Noongar sounds the cast found hardest to learn. Her approach included listening to the actors for accuracy while reading and following the script. In terms of giving feedback to the actors, Luzita felt the most respectful way of giving notes (as she is not a Noongar language speaker) would be to give the page number and listed words or phrases that needed adjusting. She then emailed these notes to Clint asking him to read them out loud and pronounce the words for the actors.

Clint, Kylie and Yibiyung also offered guidance in aspects of the language that were more challenging, such as identifying the consonants that required attention. One of the first challenges for the actors was articulating the ‘retroflex stop’ /rt/ (eg *kert-kert* ‘quickly’), which does not exist in Australian English, making it an unfamiliar gesture for the performers. The retroflex /rt/ is made by curling the tip of the tongue back against the hard palate (the roof of the mouth), as in *nookert* (‘sleep’) or *yoowart* (‘no’, ‘not’), as well as a ‘retroflex nasal stop’ /rnt/ where the air stream passes through the nose before creating the stop, as in the word *ngoornt* (‘lay’). This is ‘a very muscular action for the tongue to perform, and if an actor is not used to it, it may take a while to develop the agility to make this movement quickly’ (Sharpe and Rowles 2007, 67). While in rehearsals, Luzita had to listen very carefully to the difference between the /rt/ and /rnt/ in word endings, as some of the actors were more consistent with these consonant clusters than others.

Another challenge to speaking the language was the co-existence of the voiced velar nasal ‘ng’ consonant /ŋ/ and the voiced palatal nasal ‘ny’ consonant /ɲ/ in the same word, such as *ngany* (meaning ‘I’, or ‘me’). The first consonant, ‘ng’, is made by the back of the tongue touching the

velum (as in a word like 'sing'), while in the final voiced palatal nasal consonant, the tongue is touching the roof of the mouth using the body of the tongue (similar to the middle 'n' sound in 'onion'). Words like *ngany* require a huge amount of flexibility in the back and the body of the tongue.

Early in her work with the group, Luzita suggested the actors try an adaptation of a bone-prop, placing a knuckle in between their teeth to increase the height and openness of the jaw. Conventionally, in English theatre contexts, the actor would then remove the knuckle (or bone-prop) and retain the space created so that the sound is released into the space, rather than being held in the back of the mouth. Unexpectedly, this activity actually helped the actors visualise the placement of the tongue in the back and middle of the mouth and functioned to create more space for effective pronunciation of 'ng', 'ny' and retroflex /r/ consonants. Rather than exclusively encouraging forward projection, an open jaw also means that 'the muscles are working in a bigger space within the mouth and have to learn to be very strong and accurate' (Rodenburg 1997, 108). The actors appropriated and adapted the colonial tool of the bone-prop, developing an impromptu warm-up routine of reciting Noongar-language lines with a knuckle placed between the teeth, paying attention to the resonance of the resulting sounds in the skull and body.

An inevitable element of learning a new skill, whether an accent or a new language, is facing and overcoming small difficulties or failures. Sitting with discomfort, leaning into it and accepting that one cannot be instantly perfect is a fundamental part of the process. Failing in order to succeed is a proven learning methodology (Alan, Boneva, and Ertac 2019), which can be applied to accent and language training. Throughout the process, hope, courage and bravery are essential. If the actor is reminded of this, there is more opportunity to relax, enjoy the process and keep it playful, even amidst the serious and emotional business of learning one's endangered Aboriginal language (Bracknell 2020).

A bespoke warm up exercise was devised from the challenges the actors were facing. The cast were using muscles in a way they did not ordinarily as the Noongar consonants (mentioned above) are noticeably different from English. The actors experienced tongue tension because of the demands and amount of tongue flexibility required for these new sounds. In order to address and release the tension, we worked on exercises to stretch and limber the jaw, lips, tongue, soft palate and larynx before and after each show. The exercises were designed to promote clearer tone and a resetting of the soft palate and tongue muscles after a cumulative build-up of tension. After the warm up the actors expressed the benefit of the exercises, and seemed to increase their confidence. A common habit for some actors to feel safer is to keep the sound held in the mouth rather than have it move through the body. Luzita observed that following the warm up, the dialogue flowed without effort, as the tongue was not swallowing or clamping down on the sound. Despite the articulation challenges, the actors bravely filled the space and their bodies with their voices, proudly reclaiming their Noongar language.

## Performance processes and *Kambarnap*

Kylie Bracknell ensured that development of *Hecate* set out to aid language revitalisation as a vital means to reclaim cultural identity, while healing and strengthening Noongar cultural practice. Anticipating the need for audience members to feel welcomed into, reassured by, and connected to the space, Kylie arranged for Wardandi woman Mitchella Hutchins to host *Hecate Kambarnap*, a unique pre-and-post-show gathering space celebrating Noongar people and the maintenance and care of the Noongar language. This was also a space for the *Hecate* cast to sit alongside audience members, particularly Noongar people, to share their language reclamation journey through *Hecate*. Hutchins offered warmth and cleansing fire-smoke to all wanting to honour Noongar sounds, stories and speakers, and more importantly, to people with spiritual and emotional triggers relating to language loss.

More than a collaboration between creatives and cast, *Hecate* was a collaboration with the Noongar, and even the broader community. As only three percent of the Noongar community identify as speakers of the Noongar language, *Kambarnap* was a crucial leadership measure. Kylie explains:

I expressed to Perth Festival that *Hecate* will not happen successfully if there's no *Kambarnap*. This isn't about showing off that we have the language. We need a space, separate from the theatre foyer and the dressing rooms, to cry together as one and face the fact that our language is on the brink of extinction here in our country. While this world-first production is being celebrated for its innovation, it will also celebrate attempts at wiping the Noongar language out if we don't make space for the feelings of loss our audience members are carrying. We must simultaneously support and encourage our community's healing journey. It shouldn't just be about us presenting a work for non-Noongar people to celebrate, it needs to also be about celebrating the language being restored amongst its community in a way Noongar community members can identify comfortably – a ceremony setting, not just a show.

In the lead-up to *Hecate*'s premiere, Kylie explained, 'Noongar words and philosophy are the true hero in our *Macbeth* adaptation *Hecate*. The way we communicate, signal, celebrate, sing and cry our language has always been, and will always be, powerful' (Bracknell 2020). After witnessing *Hecate*, senior Noongar language speaker Vivienne Binyarn Hansen – who participated in Noongar-only hours during *Hecate* development workshops – posted the following on social media:

Last night I had the absolute pleasure of being at the final performance of *Hecate* as part of the Festival of Perth and performed by the cast of Yirra Yaakin. Words are hard to find to describe what I saw and heard, Shakespeare spoken in the language of our Noongar people, it made tears fall from my eyes, my heart so full of wonder and sent my spirit soaring to the skies full of happiness. Congratulations to all the cast and crew on a wonderful performance [...] I know it is only going to lead to even bigger



and brighter achievements in the future. Gnung koort djerup djerup ni baalup waangening Noongar. (Vivienne Binyarn Hansen, via Facebook 17 February 2020)

Binyarn led celebratory dancing on the *Kambarnap* grounds alongside Hutchins after *Hecate's* closing performance. This was a significant act to the *Hecate* company, which confirmed that in the eyes and heart of this esteemed Noongar elder, the processes we took in developing and showing *Hecate* were respectful and appropriate.

## Conclusions

While Australia has a short history of staging European-style theatre in Aboriginal languages, the gradual abandonment of overtly assimilationist public policy, the proliferation of local cultural revitalisation programs (Bracknell 2019), and recent calls to decolonise the performing arts (Crawley 2020), likely mean that endangered Aboriginal languages such as Noongar will increasingly find their way onto Australian – and even global – stages. Based on reflections of the processes developed for *Hecate*, we suggest that individuals and institutions involved in the future training of performers, directors, vocal coaches and stage managers consider the following conclusions:

1. Holistic success hinges on the large-scale involvement of members of the endangered language group as not just advisors, but directors, creatives and cast.
2. Learning to perform in one's endangered language is not inherently safe and requires courage supported by the philosophy of brave spaces.
3. It is productive to prioritise the energy in the rehearsal room over inflexible protocols associated with European theatre.
4. Oral learning styles including song can effectively underpin endangered Indigenous language acquisition and strengthen *felt* connections between performers and ancestors.
5. In order to avoid paternalism and the potential to dash a performer's confidence, bespoke vocal training exercises need not be too technical until later in the rehearsal phase, and technical vocal notes are best delivered to actors in collaboration with a speaker of the endangered language.

Complicating recommendations for training in this field is the fact that although every Australian performing arts institution is located in a place that has significance for local Aboriginal people, the institutions themselves are overwhelmingly experienced as white and exclusionary spaces with few, if any, Aboriginal teaching staff. The starting point must be representation. Ideally, the teacher would be of the culture and/or language group represented. Mentoring through role models, faculty and instructors who reflect specific cultures is vital in the development of a more inclusive and diverse industry.

In approaching theatrical works in endangered Indigenous languages, project development, facilitation of the rehearsal room, and staging of the production

can all affect the process, and could potentially hinder endangered-language learning if an inappropriate approach is taken. Rehearsal processes are culturally specific, and necessary adjustments may need to be made in order to support the facilitation of a brave space for performers to thrive. If appropriate – and with permissions from specific community members, cultural advisors, and/or senior language speakers – non-Indigenous people contributing to an endangered language project can always work to learn the language concerned. Especially in the emotionally-charged space of endangered language performance work, you must be aware of the varied non-verbal, kinesics and paralanguage in the room. It is productive to respond to the energies and nuances of the room, rather than strictly adhere to rules and the imposition of European-centred performance protocols. Non-Indigenous practitioners especially can lead through deep listening and holding space, rather than rushing to problem-solve and move on. Running the room may take on a different guise to respectfully collaborate in a language and culture that you were not born into. Everyone must be open to learning, and to observing.

Collaborators on endangered-language projects should work to understand the needs of the individuals in the room as well as community expectations; this will help with discovering how best to collaborate with, learn from and support the company, the language, and the production as a whole. Practitioners steeped in European theatre should reframe assumptions of performance and work towards a shared understanding of what the rehearsal and performance space mean. In this regard, leadership is to set the tone for a creative space that respects community protocols based on cultural performance traditions. Practitioners and educators need to carefully consider how European-centred theatrical protocols might be oppressive or harmful, recognising impact and trauma associated with colonisation, and the ongoing work toward decolonisation of European production protocols and speech and accent training. In future endangered Indigenous language projects like *Hecate*, it is essential that we be intentional with process and engage with healing practices and holistic protocols as determined by the community involved.

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