



**Arts
Centre
Melbourne**

Vessel

Q&A with Artistic Director,
Irine Vela



Vessel

INTERVIEW WITH IRINE VELA, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Can you tell us a little about Outer Urban Projects and your role in the company?

Outer Urban Project's (OUP) is a performing arts company and our artistic vision is to facilitate the performance and storytelling of youth from Melbourne's Northern Suburbs who come from working class and ghettoised migrant backgrounds. However, even though the North is our focus we also work with young people from other areas as well and much of our work is intergenerational. It is not unusual for our major work productions to have veteran artists alongside our young emerging artists as creators and performers. We provide a number of pathways and approaches to achieve that vision. One of those is to create Major Performance works such as Vessel. I am the Artistic Director of Outer Urban Projects, and also worked as an artist and a creative producer with the company as well.

How would you define, or describe, your latest show, Vessel?

Vessel is dance theatre work. It is about what it means to give birth and where and what you are born into. Vessel is a journey from one side of the world to another, through generations, time and parallel realities via dance, music and song. It features choreography by three very unique dance artists, Nebahat Erpolat, Thomas E.S Kelly and Demi Sorono along with the talents and choreography of Outer Urban Projects' young ensemble of dancers.

What was the impetus behind creating this show? Can you give us a little insight into how it was made?

Vessel originated with a project initially called Northside Baby which was about "babies" having babies! When coming of age and parenthood happen simultaneously. Where it is not uncommon to be a grandmother at thirty five. It was an exploration of teenage pregnancy. Many of our young participants come from regions including the Pacific Islands, Africa and the Middle East where it is common for the family unit to consist of six, eight, ten or fifteen children. This was in stark contrast to the notion of the nuclear family in contemporary Melbourne – where having your first child after 45 years of age is not unusual, where countless media articles debate the work/life balance of professional couples and the one child nuclear family is common.

When thinking about this contrast, the tragedy of the Siev came to mind in which 353 people died. (146 children, 142 women and 65 men) The SEIV X was a dilapidated fishing vessel that sank carrying around 400 Asylum seekers en route from Indonesia to Christmas Island). Clearly not many survived. Some of the survivor testimonies are chilling and surreal:

"I boarded the boat with 15 other family members, 9 drowned and 6 remained. We clung on to a plank of timber for 20 hours drifting in the water. Something I witnessed left a very strange impression, a baby with umbilical cord still attached to the mother was amongst those who drowned"

There was also an artwork in my possession by the artist Kate Durham which in a sense documented the tragedy. The art work consists of recycled dolls covered in tinsel reminiscent of seaweed and the deep blue of the ocean. From a distance the work is initially enchanting and playful but on a closer look it becomes tragic.

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Vessel is performing 20-22 September, 2017
Arts Centre Melbourne's Arts Learning Program

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The notion of the womb as a vessel that protects and nurtures an embryo to survive long enough to be born in to life and the vessel that asylum seekers board to bring their families to safety and security began to coalesce as a concept – and the use of dolls and long lengths of fabric and cords thus came to be an important design element in the show.

When we are born the umbilical cord is cut and the mother and child are separated, but a symbolic umbilical cord remains that keeps us connected to our mother and our mother to us and likewise to our father and our siblings. This connection is always at risk of being severed.

When and how does a parent let go of its child and the child of its parent. Where do we find the balance between independence and dependence? There is both grief and joy in separation – and there is the trauma in stolen and lost generations – but the birth of a child seems to give us hope. It can redeem our losses.

What can the audience expect when they see Vessel?

The will see a unique dance theatre work underpinned with a through composed score that explores the universality and particularity of the experience of birth and family. Each choreographer brings a unique physical language to the work.

Why should school groups come and see this show?

So they can be inspired by young school age dancers performing in a unique and contemporary dance theatre work featuring three unique choreographers.

Because we all have experienced parenting and being a child in one way or another. Perhaps when we are young, we take it for granted.

Collaboration seems vital to the work you create. What does collaboration mean to you? What makes a good collaborator?

Collaboration is about being interested in the work and in the lives and ideas of your collaborators. It is also about trust and respecting that leadership can come from a variety of sources within a project. It's about allowing your coworkers to have the freedom to do what they're good and to facilitate and support that and vice-versa.

What advice do you have to performing arts students (dance, drama and music) who are creating and devising original works?

Trust and delve deeply in to your instincts. Do not dismiss or be ashamed of your thoughts and ideas – your own voice. Be proud of your work and ideas and always acknowledge and remain open to other talents.