

Liquid Dramaturgy in Aotearoa: Interview with Nisha Madhan and Julia Croft

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Abstract

This interview examines the dramaturgical vision and composition processes of the performance artists Nisha Madhan and Julia Croft. Using the term/idea/practice of liquid dramaturgy (Grochala 2017) I investigate how their innovative and award-winning work offers new dramaturgical strategies that can support the development of New Zealand / Aotearoa and Australian performance. Their processes are deliberately open, chaotomic and changing, the form is fragmented, nonlinear and interrupted, time is collapsed or repeated, performers remain situated and visible. It is a feminist and intersectional approach that draws upon their experience of race and gender to challenge colonialism, heteronormativity and patriarchal power structures.

Keywords: liquid dramaturgy, live art, feminist, intersectional, utopia, hope

This article examines the dramaturgical vision and composition processes of the New Zealand / Aotearoa performance artists Nisha Madhan and Julia Croft. I have witnessed their journey from actors working for a range of Auckland mainstream theatre companies to their emergence as leading international Live Art activists. Their innovative and award-winning practice offers new dramaturgical strategies and interventions that can support the development of New Zealand / Aotearoa and Australian performance.

I first encountered Croft and Madhan when working on an expanded range of productions as a writer and dramaturg in Auckland fifteen years ago. They moved between diverse projects developing their craft as actors but became increasingly frustrated with the politics and forms of representation in linear, conventional dramatic theatre. In this interview they articulate how and why they have become Live Art practitioners pursuing dramaturgies that are non-linear, feminist and subversive through constant experimentation. Their performances challenge power and privilege by attempting to resist racism, sexism, and heteronormativity in New Zealand / Aotearoa.

It is difficult to capture Auckland's theatre and performance scene as it constantly evolves and develops but there is a thriving and diverse community of established theatres, companies, and emerging artists. It is currently recovering from Covid-19 and facing funding threats which may result in re-structuring and the cancellation of productions. Recent positive developments include the rebuild of the Māori Te Pou Theatre, a strong wave of productions

from Asian theatre-makers and new works by Black Creatives Aotearoa. Most support for the independent artist community comes from Basement Theatre where Madhan worked as Programming Director between 2019 and 2023. They have a 'Hire for Nothing' model (free venue hire), a "Choose What you Pay" ticketing scheme, and an artist remuneration policy that protects the financial safety of artists taking part in development programmes.

To investigate the work of Madhan and Croft I will use the concept of liquid dramaturgy which was employed by Sarah Grochala when describing examples of political drama in Britain that challenged traditional structures of modernity to establish new forms. In this work:

Temporal dramaturgies shift from a successive towards a more simultaneous understanding of time; spatial dramaturgies become less concrete and more virtual; plot structures question linear mechanical and socio-psychological models of causation; the focalization of the social subject moves from an objective to subjective viewpoint.

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Madhan and Croft have advanced these strategies to create a liquid dramaturgy that is free to flow with no fixed roles. Their process is deliberately open, chaosmotic and changing, the form is fragmented, nonlinear and interrupted, time is collapsed or repeated, performers remain situated and visible. This is a feminist and intersectional approach that draws upon their experience of race and gender to challenge colonialism, heteronormativity, and patriarchal power structures. They dramaturg the material by directing the flow of energy and power between collaborators and by never positioning themselves as experts:

I'd rather sit in kinship with my questions and all that makes up the muck of the world, than imagine myself as any kind of expert in dominance over it.

Madhan, interview 2023



Power Ballad, created by Julia Croft and Nisha Madhan with dramaturgy from Kate Prior, directed by Nisha Madhan, performed by Julia Croft, Basement Theatre and Edinburgh Festival 2017. Photo: Peter Jennings

One of their first collaborations was *Power Ballad* inspired by the writing of Kathy Acker: “I am looking for a language which exists outside the patriarchal definitions. Of course, that is not possible. But who is any longer interested in the possible” (84). This work was a deconstruction and undoing of patriarchal and colonial constructs in language using a vocal pedal, a microphone and 1980’s karaoke. Rachel Longshaw-Park observed that there was no clear narrative but feminist discourse, strong humour, and some iconic power ballads: “Madhan and Croft manage to crack open language casting a critical lens over its power. This is theatre – strong feminist theatre – cleverly crafted to point out the inadequacies of our language when we attempt to demonstrate something outside the patriarchal system” (1).

Created in 2017 with dramaturgy from Kate Prior, the work played to massive critical and audience acclaim in New Zealand and was part of the Summerhall programme at the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it was shortlisted for the prestigious Total Theatre Award for best-emerging artists/company.



Medusa, created by Bronwyn Ensor, Julia Croft, Nisha Madhan and Frances Libeau, directed by Virginia Frankovich, performed by Bronwyn Ensor, Julia Croft and Nisha Madhan, Circa Theatre 2018. Photo: Julia Zhu

Medusa was a live art theatrical performance that investigated the aesthetics of fascination and the female gaze while celebrating the transformative and erotic power of female rage. It deconstructed the classic narrative to explore what a female gaze could look like and how it can hold power. Cynthia Lam observed that *Medusa*: “made me question and re-think what theatre can be, who Medusa is, what she means to us today, and how women can express their rage and despair and yet still embrace one another and not be considered monsters” (1). The work was created in collaboration with Virginia Frankovich with sonic elements from Frances Libeau.



Working on my Night Moves created by Nisha Madhan, Julia Croft, Meg Rollandi and Te Aihe Butler, directed by Nisha Madhan, performed by Julia Croft, Basement Theatre and Edinburgh Festival 2019. Photo: Andi Crown

Working On My Night Moves in 2019 was a physical Live Art Installation designed by Meg Rollandi with sound from Te Aihe Butler that challenged the audience to imagine a world radically reshaped by feminism. Croft re-created the world on stage as the audience were moved around the space. Inspired by the theory of Karen Barad, Donna Haraway and José Esteban Munoz the work seeks a futurism that speaks to the complexities of gender and sexual politics while simultaneously creating a set of strategies for a potential utopian future. Anuja Mitra writes that: “*Night Moves* is a dreamy gesture to the boundaries of theatre, it invites us to come along with Julia, it’s solo performer, as she attempts to break free from the patriarchy and even the space-time continuum” (1). The piece won the Total Theatre Award for Best Physical and Visual Production at The Edinburgh Festival 2019 as well as The Auckland Theatre Awards for Excellence.



Terrapolis created by Julia Croft, Nisha Madhan, Meg Rollandi and Jason Wright, directed by Nisha Madhan, performed by Julia Croft, Basement Theatre 2022. Photo: Andi Crown

Terrapolis attempted to promote a more sustainable and utopian way of living and was inspired by Donna Haraway's 1985 *Cyborg Manifesto*. The work imagined alternative webs of relationships between human bodies and the "natural" through new imagined ecologies and eco-systems, social spaces, desires, societies, species, and objects. It featured live sound design by Jason Wright and performance design by Meg Rollandi. Croft states that:

Terrapolis is intended both as a eulogy and an act of radical hope. It is me trying to grapple with how to be on a planet that is facing ecological catastrophe, while I can never manage to think more into the future than next week. It doesn't solve anything. But maybe it shouldn't try to.

Metro Arts



Thelma and Louise, created and performed by Nisha Madhan and Julia Croft, in development for performances in 2024.
Photo: Andi Crown

Thelma and Louise (working title) will be a live art, musical, dreamscape, mash-up of the iconic movie. It has been in development since 2022 and will be presented in 2024 with Te Aihē Butler, Calvin Hudson, and John Verryt.

Supporting Jill Dolan’s argument for utopian performatives, Madhan and Croft have explored new ways of seeing and making that persuade us that: “beyond this ‘now’ of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later” (7). They are not interested in dystopian visions of the future but use hope and joy as weapons for change: “Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope” (Solnit 5) They are not afraid to embrace the unknown and have transformed assumptions about what and who matters.

In this interview I wanted to investigate how the term/idea/practice of liquid dramaturgy is an effective way to capture their performance compositions and to interrogate their dramaturgical processes, influences, creative strategies, challenges, and strengths. The discussion took place in February 2023 and was then developed through further discussion and clarification.



Nisha Madhan and Julia Croft 2023. Photo: Nisha Madhan

Fiona: Could you describe how you began to work together as performance artists?

Nisha: I feel that Julia has a pretty good creation story. Is that what you call it? The origin story?

Julia: We had sort of known each other around Auckland but I actively pursued Nisha and that is the way we ended up working together. I was aware of her practice and saw her show at an old disused club that had been turned into an artist-run space called The Snake Pit, run by Sam Thomas. We met for coffee later, I was deeply eager to make a good impression. Nisha turned up with this reading list for me, sort of like a Live Art 101.

Nisha: What an arrogant arsehole!

Julia: Not long after that we were both cast in a touring theatre company and found ourselves on the road for months. We got to know each other really well over that time. There were lots of conversations over bottles of wine and we built a shared language, humour, and trust. I think it happened organically and we found that we had similar tastes and were interested in similar socio-political questions.

Nisha: In defence of the reading list, I had been living in Paris and Brussels with the performance artist Stephen Bain who introduced me to the world of Live Art. It's also where I met the director Kate McIntosh and discovered the company Forced Entertainment. I knew there was not much of this work happening in New Zealand, or at least I hadn't found it yet, so whenever someone was interested in my practice, I suggested reading these books because they really inspired me. I was trying to spread Live Art around.

It's important for me now to say that my perceived lack of a Live Art scene in Aotearoa was undoubtedly due to the colonial straps on the arts scene. Live Art was there and alive through my actors training with people like Chris Jannides and Charles Koroneho, through Alexa Wilson's trailblazing work, not to mention the countless number of Māori and Pasifika artists who were and continue to be overlooked.

The piece at the Snake Pit was special, it held the seeds of all my work. It was the first time I had experimented with those post-dramatic elements of Live Art that I love, and on reflection I realise that all my work tends to play with cosmic threads, repetition, a gentle yet alarming hold of the audience/performer relationship and an infuriating inability to leave the fourth wall alone. I've also always preferred a surprising, found space rather than a classic theatre setting. And the Snake Pit was this grungy, artist-run space on High Street, that used to be a notorious nightclub. Throughout this time, I was living around the corner in a warehouse apartment that I had turned into an artist hub on the red-light K-road, so it was the perfect spot for me and a brilliant subversion of what I was often pigeonholed as: the good little Indian girl.

While all this was going on, Julia and I were working and touring on the road as actors together. And something about the juxtaposition of this mainstream life and experimental practice fuelled one another. Julia says that we learned to live with each other before we learned to collaborate with each other which is really a nice way to think about how and why it works.

Fiona: How do you define and describe your practice?

Julia: First of all, it changes all the time and that is deliberate, we do not want it to stay still. I think both of us really value the sense of reaching or striving and pushing a little bit further each time. And I like the feeling of jumping off cliffs.

Nisha: I look up to artists that are continually putting themselves in spaces of uncertainty or risk. I don't think we have explicit conversations about this, but I know that it is a shared value.

Julia: And we get bored easily. So, each project tends to be a reaction against the last thing. Like if one project was messy, I want to make something really minimalist. Or if one project is a festival involving fifty people, the next thing I want is a team of four, you know?

Nisha: We make work in a couple of ways. Firstly, we make the type of work where the form and the content reflect each other, they cannot do without each other. The form in many ways is the content. So, for example, when Julia came to me wanting to create a solo that interrogated patriarchal systems in language, it made sense to explore it through a fragmented, non-linear form (directly opposing the long-loved three-act-beginning-middle-and-end, logic fuelled structures of the canon) and through a microphone, a phallic symbol charged with the power of that very pointed question: "who gets to speak?" These elements were part of the forms that made up *Power Ballad*, which wished to create its own language, free from a patriarchal grip. This show has been proven to annoy the hell out of white men. We're proud of that.

The nature of our relationship and collaboration is inextricable from what we make. In the journey of our intersectional relationship, we are always pulling at the threads of the politics that exist between us.

If I was forced to define it, I would say that we make intersectional feminist work that is expressed through our friendship and process, it flows and leaks between us. And that is how we have managed to sustain our work and collaborate for the last ten years.

Julia: I'm very taken with this term "liquid dramaturgy," which I've never used. It feels in line with an intersectional feminist practice that creates a fluidity around hierarchies and roles. We tried to make a feminist project which had zero hierarchy and it was a goddamn nightmare. So now, what we're doing is fluid with how and where each of our interests goes. I am performing and Nisha is directing but we always swap roles. Nisha will perform and I'll slip out and then I will perform, and Nisha will slip out. Our roles are constantly liquid and fluid.

And the same goes for the designers and technicians that we work with. We don't necessarily say you're the set designer so give us a model. In the early stages we are all on the floor trying to figure stuff out together and everyone is the performer, and everyone is the designer. There is a fluid negotiation between what those roles are doing.

I love the term "liquid dramaturgy" as a way to think about what you are constructing, but also how. Liquidity of leaking could be a strategy. A strategy for a process, a dramaturgy, a politic, an identity. I think a lot about movement and stasis and the many ways that our work and our friendship and my life are in constant movement and negotiation.

It feels like a really poetic way to conceptualise your life and time passing through it, like it is serious of spreading liquid or ooze, things and feelings, curiosities and love affairs that might leak into and over each other. I recently got two jellyfish tattooed on me which I've been thinking about for ages. The reason I chose them as my talisman was as a reminder to keep embracing the things that are fluid, things that don't stay still.

Nisha: *Medusa* was the project where we tried to achieve that totally flat hierarchy that we all love to dream about. And it was hard. Because there were no models for us to follow. We were trying to create a completely new way of working with no road map and we wouldn't do it again in quite the way that we did. But it was a great show and a source of pride between us. And so now, rather than thinking of flattening hierarchies, we talk about how power shifts around the room, which allows every single person in the team to experience or use that power when needed and is a much more dynamically fuelled process. But power creeps in despite our best efforts sometimes from the outside world more than our internally built worlds.

Mostly the work is identified as Julia's which can be very frustrating. The work is often performed by Julia and so the kudos go immediately to her. People see the solo performer and think that they have made it all themselves and very rarely recognise the makers behind it. And let's not forget that her whiteness lends itself to being seen more comfortably as the star of the show than my brown body does. I, at times, am deliberate in my choices to stay off stage because (sad as it may sound to the white and fragile amongst us) I know that she can get away with expressing more complex modes of feminism through her perceived blank space body, than I can through my complex and colonised one.

Even if I say that I am the director of the work, they still minimise this contribution, by assuming that she created it by herself, and I just put some lights on it. So, I often explicitly state that we co-create the work, *then* Julia performs, and I direct. But I have to spell it out, often contractually, if I want the nuance of the collaboration to be understood. We know that what is happening is that people are effectively erasing the person of colour in this situation. We talk about this very honestly and create systems to mitigate crediting with contractual clauses that embed my IP in the work.

Julia knows for example that it is her job to talk to the organisations that work with us about checking their privilege at the door. We now work with embedded anti-racist guides in our practice. If we didn't talk honestly, and allow ourselves to sit uncomfortably together, with the confidence that we will still love each other on the other side of those conversations, the relationship, and therefore the collaboration, and the work would simply die. In some ways, art is secondary, just a by-product of us living feminist lives together.

Julia: I think that in lots of ways, our work struggles to be seen within the industry and with the audiences as I would like it to be. We are trying to create for audiences who are interested in fluid experiences, embracing the unknown, the fleshy experience over the

cognitive.

Our work is not meant to always make “sense” in a logical way, it is trying to lean into other modes of making meaning, other more somatic ways of understanding, that doesn’t always get across. We don’t need to understand everything. Some things are not meant for understanding. Isadora Duncan once said: “If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it,” something like that sentiment.

There is thought behind it, behind the openness and the mystery we are looking for new worlds, or at least new ways of being in this one and we need radically new ways of thinking and behaving (or radically old ones). In *Soul Of The Sea* Gregory Stone and Nishan Degnarain argue that static linear solutions for a non-linear system will not work.

Our work struggles (particularly in the New Zealand / Aotearoa context) because we have inherited ways of working based on there being actors, directors, playwrights, and reductive categories. You are also either dance or theatre. You are a writer or a dancer. I feel that we are liquidating through our collaboration and the work is fluid between various genres. We don’t want to have a company structure so we ‘liquid’ our way through the tax system too.



Power Ballad, created by Julia Croft and Nisha Madhan with dramaturgy from Kate Prior, directed by Nisha Madhan, performed by Julia Croft, Basement Theatre and Edinburgh Festival 2017. Photo: Peter Jennings

Fiona: So how does this liquidity influence your composition processes?

Nisha: We are very instinct-led. There is an intentional looseness and chaos in how the room is organised that invites the sense of liquidity. We're often led by a stream-of-consciousness style making, particularly when we co-write there's that beautiful sense of not knowing who created what, or who decided on what.

Julia: Whenever I try to work with nine-to-five hours, an hour lunch break and a week schedule of what bits to work on, it squashes the instinct, the joy and the play. We tend to work short hours, for example ten-to-three with an hour lunch break.

Nisha: We have a lot of materials in the room. And I always end up with them sort of scattered. There is the sense that when one thing is happening, it can spark something other. I used to be really embarrassed about that chaos but now I know that there is a real purpose to this methodology.

We are strategizing chaos and strategizing wildness with a deliberate sense of abandonment. I think often of that idea of the stream flowing down the mountain, how it flows freely but simultaneously carves its course over years and years.

Julia: Yes, you may set up a task and then realise that the accidental piece of foil that you are playing with, while you are focussing on the task, has more energy and possibility. There is a real understanding between us that when this moment happens, we follow it. You follow the current in the room. We're trying to let our subconscious make the choices a lot of the time.

Nisha: And we insist on having any technology that we are working with in the room so that whoever is using it is comfortable as a technician. It is a very playful process, kind of like being a scientist, for example we will pick up an object and create a question: how do we make the object the performer rather than Julia? And then we will put it through a bunch of tests and experiments. Is that how a scientist works? Or is that how I, as an artist, think a scientist works?!

We have become good at abandoning things when they are no longer fun, not forcing ourselves to do things that are not generative. And that goes for how long you spend in the room. So just because you are not in the rehearsal room does not mean that you are not working on the project or thinking about it or collaborating. It is always living in you. Always bubbling away.

Julia: And sometimes it is just better to get out and go away. I always joke about going to the pub afterwards being part of the process, but it's true that that is where we work a lot of things out. A friend of mine called it "focus unfocussing." And my version of that is going to the pub. And I think Nisha's version is having a nap.

Nisha: Yes. I deliberately go to sleep and pay attention to my thoughts as they start to become more dream-like. And then if I hit upon something, I will text you. I know how good the idea is based on how long you take to answer me. Straight away, then I know it's a thing. And if it takes more than half an hour and comes back with a diplomatic answer then I know it's not good. It is a practice that we've started to give due weight to.

Julia: It took me a long time to take seriously that if it really is a feminist or queer process it was going to operate outside inherited structures. It may look different, but the work is just as serious.

Fiona: Is it like a wave that moves between you?

Julia: Yes. The material is embodied by everyone in the room – we have worked in this way together now on five productions: *Power Ballad*, *Terrapolis*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Medusa* and FOLA (The Festival of Live Art in Auckland February 2023).

Nisha: FOLA was held at Basement Theatre in Auckland with around thirty artists. It is the most current expression of what we are interested in and what our questions are. The way that we co-directed this festival very much draws on the way that we are in a rehearsal room together. We needed that very solid artistic practice for these tricky collaborative roles.

The origin story for this you will love Fiona, we came up with the idea in a hot tub drinking wine at a festival, so we were surrounded by liquid!

It is the festival that we would have liked to be part of when first starting out. We wanted to develop, define and safeguard live art in New Zealand / Aotearoa and create a festival like the ones we had experienced ourselves.

Julia: We wanted to be hospitable, to create a context, support a strong community and safeguard the future for artists like us. We were able to value and validate artists who are often not taken seriously. We wanted to respect their work, create a space, and then get out of their way. No matter what they asked for, we took their requests seriously.

Nisha: We wanted to treat artists in the way that we wanted to be treated and show that artists can make their own work and be good administrators. For example, we are very good at creating health and safety plans because we have to be, and we often get underestimated for that. You must be super prepared to be able to take risks. We have had so much unsolicited advice from people who do not even know what Live Art is. It has been producing advice and dramaturgical advice, all unsolicited, patronising and coming from a place of underestimation.

We've also had deafening silence from people who think their silence hides their obvious disapproval. After so many years supporting young, independent artists through the process of self-determined storytelling as the Programmer of Basement Theatre, I know that these

things hurt artists. These are things we refuse to do to others.

We are proud that we managed to keep ninety percent of the artists with us through several disasters, including cancellations due to Covid and Cyclone Gabrielle. We managed to give them four pay cheques during that time. Paying the artists to live is as much development as paying them to be in a rehearsal room.

I'm a firm believer that everything put in place in Aotearoa to support artists during the pandemic (the wage subsidy, the CNZ artist top-up to that subsidy, the Ministry for Cultural Heritage event support scheme and all artist benefits) should be the base level artists should receive from now on, particularly as we stand no longer on the brink but in the middle of Climate Change.

Fiona: How and why do you use questions in your composition process?

Nisha: I read somewhere, a long time ago, probably through my Marina Abramovic phase (haha) that the body is the place of the question in the work.

Julia: We also put the audience body inside that question and that is one of the differences between theatre and performance. Theatre attempts to ask a question and write the answer, and Live Art attempts to embody that question as a way of asking and seeking that answer. Theatre might show you a representation of a problem, acted beautifully and perhaps cathartically, Live Art asks you to sit with, beside, and witness a body answering a question in real time and space, with no artifice, in real time and space.

The "theatre" version of *Night Moves* might have been a monologue about a female astronaut who dreams that she could change Einstein's theories of relativity. The "live art" version asks you to be with me while I change everything that was in the air at the start of the work to be on the floor at the end and vice versa. It asks you to sit with me while I try and change gravity.

Often our work begins with life questions and starts from theory, we will be drawn to a question that may be politically responsible. For example, *Power Ballad* was inspired by the 2016 election in America and how Hilary Clinton was talked about. At the same time, I was examining my sexuality and gender to explore how that sits in a feminist politic, so our question was, how far does misogyny go down inside the language?

We became interested in power and gender. From here we researched feminist and queer writers like Kathy Acker, Karen Barad, Mackenzie Wark, Donna Haraway and José Esteban Muñoz. These theorists led us down streams that led to fragmented text, an attempt to break the space-time continuum, a building and rebuilding of utopia after utopia. The questions lead us to the theory, which then leads to the practice of exploring how we can embody these

ideas. The act of making from these thinkers is not an act of translation, it's not adaption, it is a quest to better understand their worlds through putting our bodies, in a space, with you. This is not always successful but mostly leads us somewhere fertile.

We can both be very sentimental makers, which is probably the engine behind it all, so those questions are very useful because we could go so saccharine. Although, in *Thelma and Louise* we decided to embrace this possibility. It was our first work together after several lockdowns and we somehow became allergic to anything that didn't bring us immediate pleasure and joy. The feeling of finally being able to get back to what we are good at in front of an audience made us prioritise joy and sentimentality as the vehicle for our political positions. Sometimes it can feel the other way around. But as we have grown and embodied those positions more, it's almost like we don't need to say or show as much. Our bodies have started to speak for themselves.

Nisha: We make quick decisions; we don't inhabit the space of uncertainty for long. Which is at odds with our love for creating uncertain spaces! But I guess, what I mean is, our ability to reach the feeling or make the point is getting faster.

Fiona: How and why is joy a strategy for hope in your work?

Nisha: We are doing edgy, risk-full work, but we also need a laugh. New Zealand / Aotearoa audiences want this too, the icebreaker. In work that is challenging white supremacy and misogyny we need to have joy for ourselves. Patriarchy and heteronormativity continue to dominate and we need to see a queer utopia on the horizon to continue.

In *Terrapolis* we were searching for this other universe, in *Night Moves* we made our own and *Thelma and Louise* embraces it too. We questioned the importance of our friendship, how we operate as feminists and artists, and chose to make the ultimate buddy road trip movie.

I do not think that Live Art is more important than mainstream theatre. We have worked in both, but I want to use each of them and their inherent strengths to topple white supremacy and misogyny. Both of us flying in *Thelma and Louise*, and Julia smashing rocks with a sledgehammer in *Terrapolis* were useful strategies for this. The liquidity comes from not being locked down.

Julia: Performing any kind of temporality is glorious to me because it is an impossible task. How could we crack the stronghold that linear temporality has on us, and if we could crack it, just for a second, that seems to me deeply connected to a larger political crack that is asking us to imagine a world different from this one. Playing with temporality is a quest and a metaphor. Or as the great Karen Barad said, we are simply "troubling time."

I have been deeply influenced by the work of José Esteban Muñoz, and that hopefulness, I hope is present in what we make. He speaks of Queerness as “a warm horizon imbued with potentiality...a doing for and toward the future” (1).

In *Terrapolis* we were seeking this future inside the geographic formations of the past. Trying to break the binary of past and future, trying to get into the void, which according to Barad is thick with possibility too. I also have been very inspired by Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds*, who in turn is inspired by Sedgwick.

And now it occurs to me that maybe after looking to the future for the last few works, *Thelma and Louise* is our attempt at an omnipresence, an ever repeating present, in the style of the 1980s, in a global pandemic of the early 2020’s. And the ever-glorious Astrida Neimanis speaks so beautifully of water as an archive to understand nonlinearity, to remaining time and our place in building it while we live through it.

I don’t have a clear answer here. We don’t want to be pinned down; we want multiple possibilities. And a good collaboration is all about joy, but joy can be different for everyone. Sometimes the joy is in the trouble, sometimes it’s in a pop song.

Nisha: Our collaborators stay with us for a long time and have a strong sense of ownership. We tried to maintain joy even in the middle of the cyclone with FOLA, we clung to joy.



Working on my Night Moves created by Nisha Madhan, Julia Croft, Meg Rollandi and Te Aihe Butler, directed by Nisha Madhan, performed by Julia Croft, Basement Theatre and Edinburgh Festival 2019.
Photo: Rebecca Zephyr

Julia: Liquid dramaturgy provides a fluidity of roles. We have worked with dramaturgs and look forward to doing it again but for the moment we create the dramaturgical questions. It may be led by an object or sound; it might be the dramaturgy of space. In some ways because the work starts from this question, we have less of a need for an external force to ask it of the work. Our idea of dramaturgy is pretty fluid.

Nisha: For example, we might invite an astronomer or a tarot reader to be our dramaturg, we find who we need for the work and time. Julia is making a piece for children now and a child is her dramaturg. From a feminist perspective everyone is the expert and there is no one source of truth.

We are interested in decentring the human figure but have not yet achieved this. How do you decentre yourself as a white woman, how do you cede power? How do I decentre myself as an immigrant, a guest on someone else's land? How do I cede power? We have to be co-conspirators. We have to get in the fire together. Don't watch me burn and decide the best thing to do is give space to me, after it was you, coloniser, who started this fire in the first place. We are still asking these same questions and that is fine. We need to keep asking.

Julia: And, as Haraway says, we must stay with the trouble, in kinship with it, rather than seeking dominance over it. We're looking for tentacular thinking, that is with the body and with many arms. Trying in all this to imagine a different way we could be together somewhere. There is so much dystopian work already out there, we don't need to make more!

We need to celebrate our lives and our joy. It is a world-building process – we build and destroy world after world in *Terrapolis*, we build and rebuild world after world in *Night Moves*. There must be a sense of possibility and hope. And those two things require hard labour which we deliberately make visible. It requires strength and practice to create change. Rebecca Solnit articulates this so well, that there is muscle in hope, it's not passive, it's active and muscular and hard and ongoing. It too is a practice.

Nisha: FOLA will continue this work, provide a community, encouragement, and empowerment. We want to unpack and question the resistance to this work that exists in New Zealand. There is a need to be certain, "to get it," and a lack of confidence and tolerance of work that occupies the grey zone.

I always remember the director Kate McIntosh observing that people reveal themselves when they discuss a work. They reveal their desires, their frustrations, their insecurities, their hopes – all this couched under a false sense of "objectivity." When I approach others in this mindset, their reactions are gifts, I learn so much about them. I only wish they could also see their own reactions in this way. It would lead to less angry people.

Julia: A liquid dramaturgy keeps on moving, does not settle but remains fluid, this is how we want to continue developing as artists. We hope that there is no end to the stream. If we arrive at utopia, at the end of the rainbow, in some ways we've lost. Liquidity is a way for us to continue in a practice that struggles to be sustainable. Were it not for a liquid approach, we should have stopped years ago. But every time we threaten to move to the country and raise horses ...

Nisha:... a new possibility for a stream to gush or trickle or slip through opens and carves its course.

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Photo: Isabel Shore

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Photo: Mahia Te Kore

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