

dead. air

By Helen Henry, CBAA

LATER THIS YEAR, THE CBAA'S COMMUNITY RADIO NETWORK WILL BE COLLABORATING WITH THE RED ROOM COMPANY ON A SPECIAL PROJECT CALLED *RHYMING THE DEAD*, WHICH FEATURES 10 LIVING AUSTRALIAN POETS WRITING POEMS FOR AND ABOUT A DEAD POET OF THEIR CHOOSING. AHEAD OF ITS BROADCAST, WE CAUGHT UP WITH RED ROOM COMPANY'S FOUNDER JOHANNA FEATHERSTONE (PICTURED RIGHT) TO FIND OUT MORE.

What is the Red Room Company and what inspired you to create it?

The Red Room Company is a not for profit poetry organisation making unusual and useful poetry projects. These projects commission poets to write new poems, and these poems are published and promoted to large audiences in imaginative and challenging ways. Each project we make is unique. We employ and provide both mentoring and professional development opportunities to poets through our national education programs.

I created the Company because my life is enhanced having poetry in it. I wanted to build a job, and thus a life, that would enable me to pursue my love of poetry and to bring other individuals into this job, so as to share and expand ways poetry can impact on the self and the world beyond the self.

I was also keen for a personal and professional challenge as there didn't exist, and still does not exist, an arts

company inspiring and professionally employing poets through both public arts projects and education programmes. I wanted to raise the profile of poets in our community and also financially support them to create new work. I wanted to create a new arts organisation that could contribute to people's lives, through poetry. In the beginning, many people said it wasn't possible to create such an organisation, so I was even more inspired to make it work and last.

What roles can poetry play in communities?

It can enable disparate groups of people to connect because, for me, the form is about communication - of how you feel, what your experiences of the universe are, questions about small and large dimensions and all of this, in your very own voice.

There is no right or wrong in poetry, it is about using language to inquire, to explore existence and to playfully peer into the hidden.

The definition of poetry and its style changes with each poet, culture, time of creation, and so is a universe of possibility. Poetry for The Red Room Company can be performed, written, sung or painted and danced. Expression is unlimited when we use poetry to tell things the way we see and feel them. This freedom of voice means the quietest person can talk loudly, or the most marginalised story can be valued and thus all members in a community can be part of poetry.

If you could use one word to describe community radio, what would it be?

Diverse

How did you first come across community radio and what role has it played in Red Room Company

Eleven years ago I lived a few doors down from 89.7FM Eastside Radio and I ran the weekly radio show *Red Room Radio*. The content of the show was poet interviews and



performances, reviews of poetry and literature and commentaries on events and happenings in poetry, around the nation. From this show, the concept of The Red Room Company began and became a reality once I started commissioning poets to write new works and found there was an audience for these works that wasn't just practising poets but the broader community. Radio continues to be an essential part of the Company's work, as a way to broadcast poetry and relish the sonic elements, the oral capacity, of a poem.

How did *Rhyming The Dead* come to be and what can community broadcasters expect from it?

The project came about because I wanted to look into poets who are no longer alive, but who have made and continue to make an impact on contemporary Australian poets. We hear a lot about poets alive now but not much about their predecessors

or, if we do, the predecessors are poets selected by bodies such as the Board of Studies, and are often white, Australian males. So, in *Rhyming the Dead* contemporary poets look at TUPAC, Odgeroo Noonuccal, Jennifer Rankin and many more poets from the far and recent past. The project is, in a way, a thank you to the dead poets for the gifts of their words they have left with us who are alive.

The series features performances by and interviews with our ten contemporary poets. There is talk about poetry and, of course, talk about death and how death affects the writing and reading of poetry.

What piece of advice would you give someone starting out in community radio?

Treat it as seriously as any job that was paid but at the same time have fun making mistakes and experimenting.

WANT TO BROADCAST

RHYMING THE DEAD?

This 5-part series of half-hour programs will be available to stations and broadcast on the Community Radio Network (CRN) from October 2015. Following the broadcasts, all poems will be available on www.redroomcompany.org.



Pictured: *Rhyming The Dead*