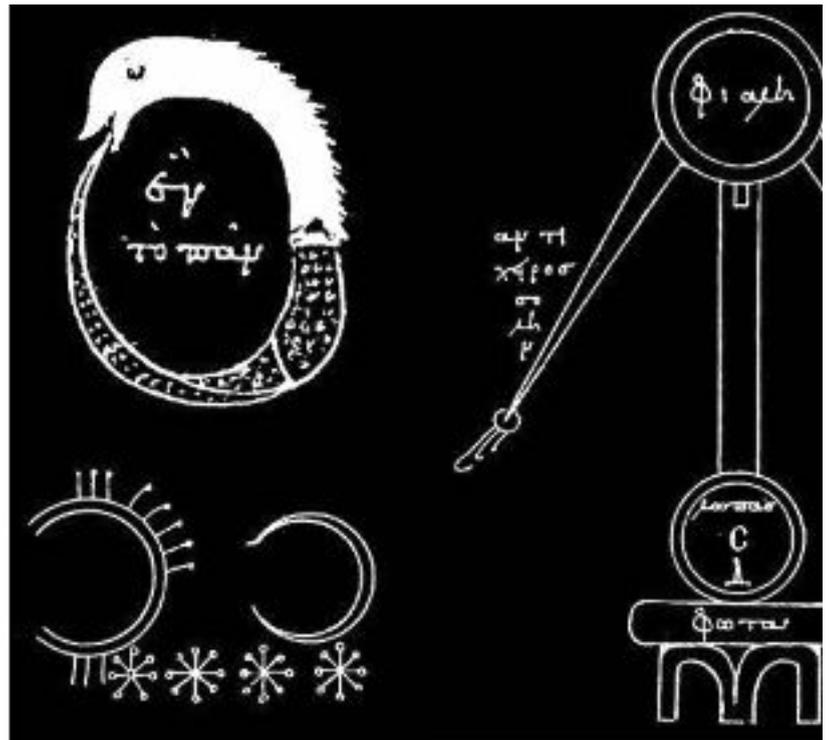


REVIEW

The Alchemist's Guide to the Undercity

Explore the Undercity of Perth on a walking tour with the Alchemist - street prophet, mystic, mad clown. Come along as you like and for free, for a journey to the depths, and back again. You'll never view the Undercity in the same way again. This website is powered by figshare.com.

The Alchemist's Guide to the Undercity is presented by [Daz Phillips](http://dazphilips.com), comedian, actor, director, producer and writer in both theatre and film. She is a qualified [Creative Arts Therapist](http://www.creativearts.com.au), and has made this show as part of her doctoral research into the therapeutic value of theatre creation.



Screenshot: <https://alchemisttours.com/>

The Alchemists Guide To The Undercity

Perth Fringe World Festival

Presented by the Flame Collective

Perth, Western Australia - 4 February 2020

DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.11947803](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.11947803)

A Review by Alexander Hayes, Partner, Ngikalikarra Media.

<http://www.ngikalikarra.org>

Introduction



Screenshot: <http://www.fringeworld.com.au>

Magali McDuffie and Alexander Hayes, researchers, filmmakers and Partners of Ngikalikarra Media (Hayes and McDuffie, 2020) recently attended an event on the 4th February titled 'The Alchemists Guide To The Undercity' presented by the Flame Collective (Phillips and Phillips, 2020) in Perth, Western Australia which was part of the Perth 2020 'Fringe World Festival'.

“... Flame Collective brings together artists to explore the undiscovered geography of human interaction, to visit places forgotten by the institutions of power and to advocate for connection in an age of dissociation and disillusionment.” (Fringe World, 2020b)

The event was billed as an opportunity for Fringe World audience members to “...explore the Undercity of Perth on a walking tour with the Alchemist - street prophet, storyteller, mad clown.” (Fringe World, 2020b)

“... Come or go as you like and for free, for a journey to the depths, and back again. You'll never view the Undercity in the same way again.” (Fringe World, 2020b)

The event was also described as an opportunity to be guided through Perth's history in a performance starring Cara Phillips who is "... is an actor, director, lecturer and writer in both theatre and film." (Fringe World, 2020b)

"... She is a qualified Experiential Creative Arts Therapist, and has made this show as part of her doctoral research into the therapeutic value of theatre creation." (Fringe World, 2020b)

Russell Square

The event departed from 'The Pleasure Garden', a Fringe World epicentre hosted by none other than Woodside mining which appeared to have cannibalised Russell Square in Northbridge, Perth, Western Australia.



Alexander Hayes in front of the 'Woodside Pleasure Garden'.

Photography by Magali McDuffie. (4 Feb, 2020)

“... On high land, it was the focal point of a new northern route from the city, created by a realignment of Melbourne Street in the south and the creation of Palmerston Street in the north (...) Russell Square did not achieve the dignified elegance of its Bloomsbury namesake. (...) The attempt to create a gracious housing estate around a genteel square was premature in an area still affected by regular flooding.” (Morel-EdnieBrown, 2008)

Participants who registered for the tour were confronted firstly with their key performer motionless and horizontally prone before being taken on a tour of ‘The Undercity’, immersed in the aptly titled story of ‘The Unconscious Mind’, in Northbridge, Perth city centre also known as Yandilup to the Aboriginal Whadjuk Nation. (South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council, 2020a)



Cara Phillips at the commencement of *The Alchemists Guide To The Undercity*.

Photograph by Alexander Hayes (4 Feb, 2020).

According to the official press release, the event promised to be a unique experience, “...combining clowning with street performance, music and magnetic resonance.”

Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020)

“...The Alchemist is created and performed by Perth based performance maker Cara Phillips (...) as part of her doctoral research into the therapeutic act of creating theatre.” Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020)



Cara Phillips clowning around in spectacle.

Photograph by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020).

The audience was reminded that ‘Northbridge’ is the name appropriated for Yandilup, Aboriginal Noongar name for the Perth inner city suburb of Northbridge, connected to

Dyeedyallalup, the Noongar name for the Perth central business district CBD. (South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council, 2020a)

The audience of approximately twenty (20) or so were firstly introduced to wandering minstrel Graham Kent (Baba Yaga's Dream Yurt) (Fringe World, 2020a) whose presence and guitar music as well as accompaniment in dialogue made for an extraordinary connection throughout this event, part self-referential in dialogue and also a contiguous anchor to the story unfolding by the main performer, Phillips, a consummate arts-maker and educator (C. Phillips, 2020).

“...The Alchemist's Guide to the Undercity is a theatre show that does not expect you to cross the theatre threshold; it explodes the concept of a threshold and meets you instead on the streets, at the edge of the shores of the unconscious.” (Press Release: Alchemist's Guide To The Undercity, 2020).



Cara Phillips introduces travelling minstrel Graham Kent.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020).

In a small posse of enraptured audience Phillips encouraged all the audience to ‘... hold hands... go on... come on we have to cross here ... it's our time to know this story together’ who formed a line, hushed their embarrassed tongues and crossed the road, from curious public to hand-clapping enrolled participants.

It is within this enrolled participation that Phillips excelled at challenging social graces, through nuanced observations and social commentary conjuring up of visions of grandeur juxtaposed with salient facts of the human condition, the audience urged to differentiate between authentic listening, persuasions of artificial technological intelligence and beliefs from long past and decades forward... all as the audience gathered listening in front of faux ‘The Manor’.



Cara Phillips introduces the concept of the Procedure.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

The author recalls how well this impromptu amassing would have been embraced by Perth entertainer great Max Kay had he been able to join this contemporaneous rendering of Perth central he so loved, a man whose legacy as an entertainer in Perth ensured the Fringe World Arts reality of today.

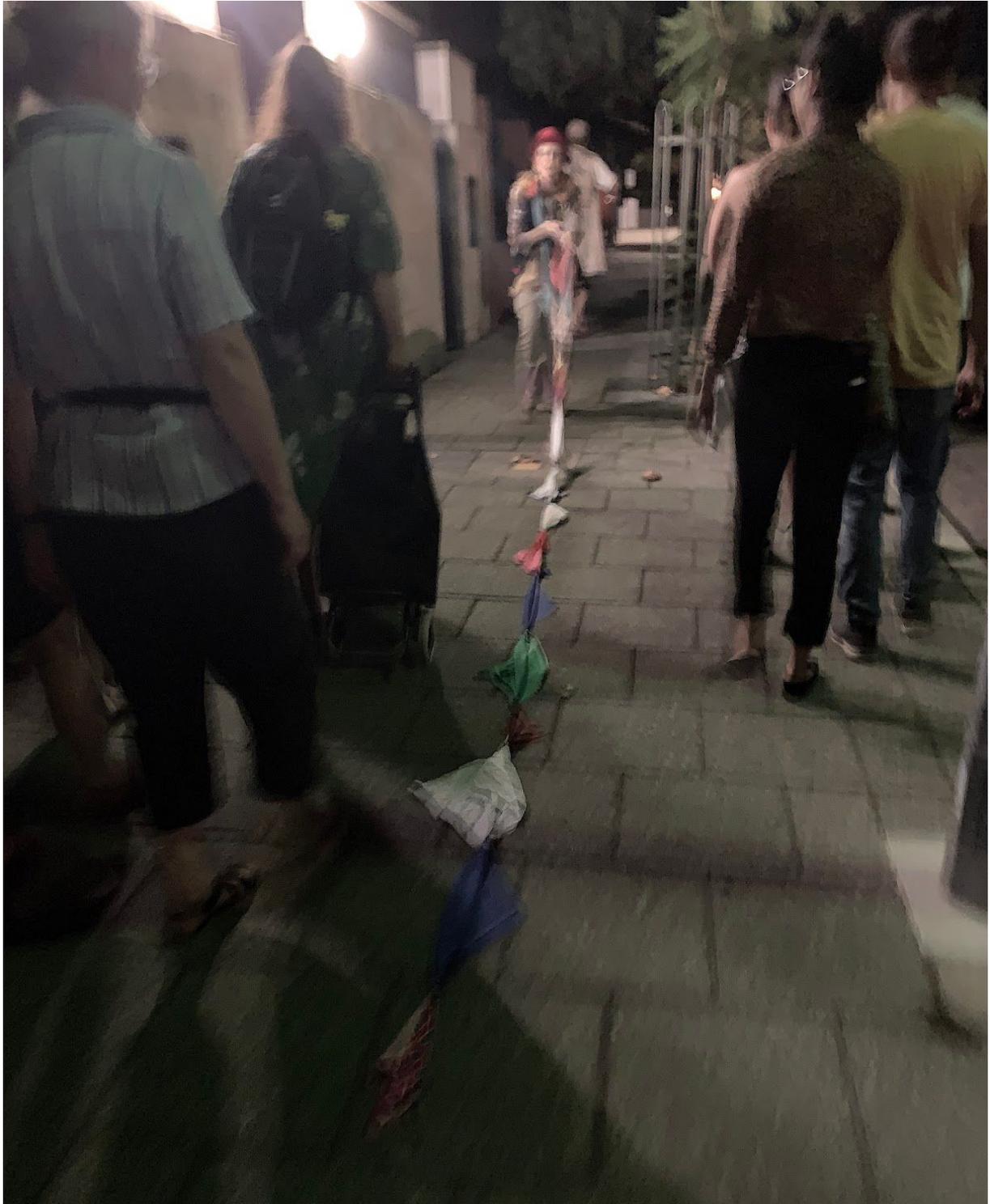
“... Members of Perth’s LGBTIQ+ community have remembered his support for the Pride Parade at a time when many councillors were opposed to funding the Northbridge parade and festival.” (OutInPerth, 2019)

Setting off deeper heading north east the audience as a ‘troupe’ heard of historical facts from the area woven amongst a social fiction which we learn later is part autobiographical; a story of a child subjected experiences which have forged the story and steeled the resolve of Phillips the performer to relate to in situ.



Cara Phillips speaks of the cult of the Procedure.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)



Cara Phillips unravelling the tale of the Procedure.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

Pausing for breath, switching from tale-telling to personal recollections Phillips joked, poetically mused and sung her way forward past the curiosity of a man walking his poodle and a couple returning from a drunken night out, a spectacle supreme in the quiet back streets of Perth city central.



Cara Phillips conjuring forward the audience.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

Hands gesticulating, fingers splayed, the workings of Phillips also drew the audience closer through questions, riddles and tricks in performance reminiscent of Pierrot, character of pantomime and commedia dell'arte and in the playful spirit of the legendary Philippe Gaulier (Rankin, 2019), minus Gaulier's caustic use of put downs.

A clever mix of walking tour show characteristically laden with a sardonic and unsettling string of common expletives, 'The Alchemist's Guide to the Undercity' achieves its stated goal of immersion amongst the everyday workings of a city centre,

police sirens wailing and pedestrians marvelling at the spectacle of a clown / poet / princess leading the audience “... down the dark alleyways of the unconscious.”
Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020)

“... It will remind you of things you hid in shoeboxes in cupboards as a child, it will pluck from the aether snippets of a tune you sang once in the dark then lost forever. In the hermetic vessel, it will combine lead with those ingredients of gnostic secrecy, and out will spring gold.” Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020)



Cara Phillips under the figs, corner of Stuart and Lake Street.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

Shrouding the audience, dark and ominous Fig trees in the park on Lake Street gave character in crooked form to the hardest part in listening to Phillips recollections of a young woman fleeing her pursuers. Seated on the grass in circular formation like a

nightmarish tea party the audience was drawn into the web of Phillips rememberings of the “... Procedure, and all have forgotten. All but the few old souls who still practice the lost arts of Alchemy.” Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020).

“... Now the group joins the Alchemist on a journey of unforgetting. Perhaps as they walk, the group will unforget that faint music that can be heard on the shores of the unconscious mind. “ Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020)



Cara Phillips on the corner of Stuart and Lake Street.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

Resolutely clear was the power Phillips brought through the experience from those in attendance who can attest to the “... alchemical power (...) channeled with the guidance of this mad clown, and that wandering minstrel.” Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020)

“... Perhaps as we walk together, realities will collapse into each other, our senses will crowd in, the shadows will flood into the light and writhing creatures of doubt and denial will lurch forth from the repressed nethermind of our city streets.” Press Release: Alchemist’s Guide To The Undercity (Cara Phillips, 2020).



Graham Kent in artistic repose.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

Both Magali and I reflected together on the experience which lasted just over an hour as being the most silent and powerful way to connect with the ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’ senses which are otherwise so dulled as we go about our daily lives. Led down the very same streets we inhabit we both gained a deeper sense of ‘knowing’, an acute awareness from the purposefully shambolic ethnographic relatedness of Phillips.



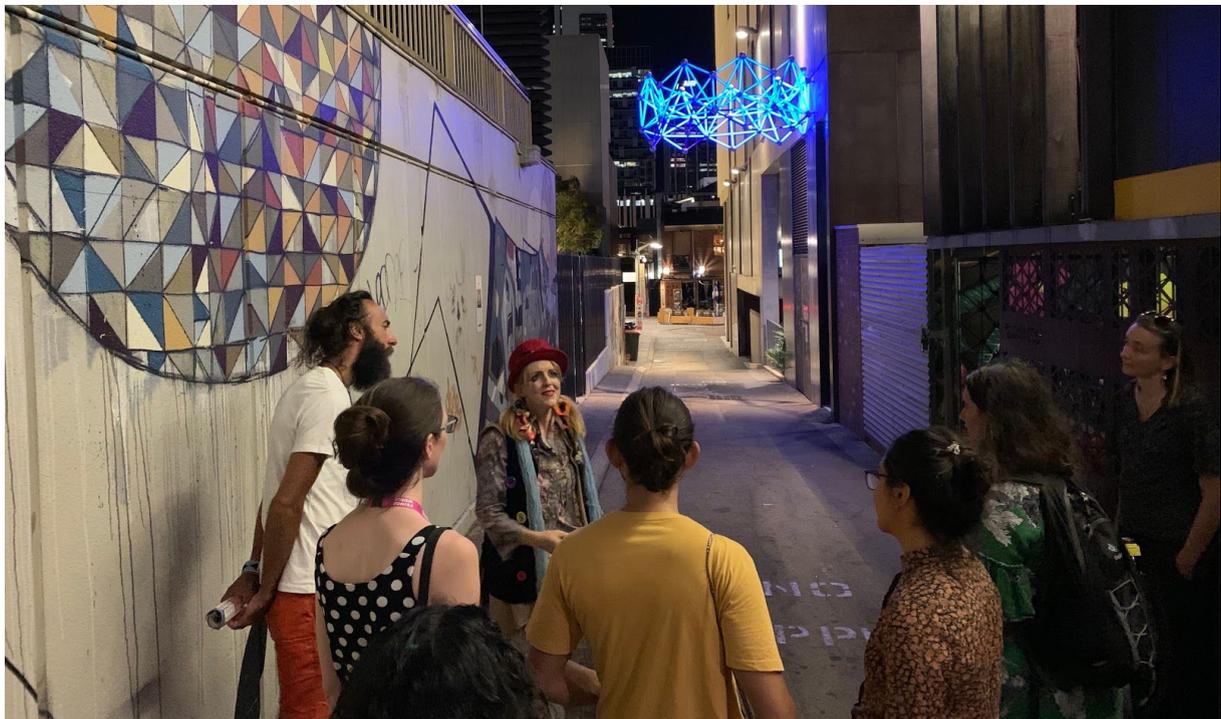
Graham Kent leads the group through song.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

Our inquiring minds wondered what further dialogic enrolment was possible, then, midway in the darkest corner of Perth’s back streets came a unification of understanding and awareness that we had ALL undergone the Procedure, our obsession with wearable computing technology, the smartphone phone an example

of the 'Mark' of the process. This aberration engaging the interlocutor, the audience, the very same ruse used by the author in his own Phd studies on the very same topic, the social and ethical implications of technology (Hayes, 2019).

As we approached William Street which connects Northbridge with the urban sprawl of Perth, Western Australia we were silenced and reminded of the need for spaces in which just one sense of seeing connects us all as humans participants in the very act of living. Observing others scurrying around as a group we silently walked into Yandilup (Northbridge) central skirting the main street and entering a neon (spew) lit alleyway, entrance to underground bars and ale houses.



Cara Phillips regroups the audience after an 'awe and wonder' wander through Northbridge.

Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

Phillips commands a mature ability to use the 'spaces between differing layers of presence' of storytelling, core to the 'intermedial nature of clown theatre' as described

by (Amsden, 2011) which for me, Alexander Hayes is undoubtedly the most compelling bridge with which to relate to this multifaceted experience. In one last act of audience spectacle and narrative enrolment, Phillips suddenly ran off into the darkened Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) car parks shrieking for us all to follow.



The Final Act - Conceptual Clustering
Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

At great peril we followed, all running and laughing yet perfectly aware we are as an audience also putting ourselves at risk (in a city centre) of intervention from law enforcement who may mistake 'the creative collective' to be a civic disruption. The result would not be pretty and yet this is a perfect indicator for Phillips as to how far we were enrolled in her story, performance, lifeworld 'telling'.

In a final act, Phillips's carefully crafted script ridiculing the non-ridiculous world (the neat, the pristine) induced a new level of gentle discomfort which had only lost only a few as we previously prepared to cross Newcastle Street from city centre to city fringe. As we looked around at each other in the audience we soon realised that in our hour of creative conviviality we had also developed a sense of audience embodied congeniality.



The Final Act - Seeing Through Singing
Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

It is with these few words and photos that Magali and I cared enough to write about an experience with the Flame Collective that goes beyond 'arts for art's sake' yearning to know more of that young soul was that was running from her pursuers, who was subjected to the cult like indoctrination, who escaped only to fall into the tentacles of the Procedure like all manner of humanity. We each, evidently as Phillips has elucidated bear responsibility for the alchemic nurturing and carriage of that child

forward out of the Procedural nightmare. An awesome bridge into the anterior, the marvellousness of memory, the frightening alchemic rendering of those 'pasts' with 'presents', this part-story and part-visual spectacle, amidst tongue lashings which for some were a torturous call on remaining 'seen' whilst acting as if innocent in 'scene', each audience member is as Nicolas Bourriard would attest one part of Phillips 'act' of completion.

“... The artist can be more accurately viewed as the "catalyst" in relational art, rather than being at the centre.” (Simpson, 2001; Bourriard, 2002)

Personally, I felt a deep sense of change returning to these streets after almost twenty (20) years away 'over east'. Perth is as Phillips revealed still steeped in histories which unless spoken on remained buried amongst what has become the spectacle and allure of the neon nightlife. Gone are the imperialists but in place of those who once dominated Yandilup as the civic heart for Perth, Western Australia we appear in so many other positions and scenes, our own humanity predated upon by a billion headed CCTV network (Michael and Michael, 2007). The reality is that shrieks of pain will still be heard from deep within Russell Square long after the Fringe World has disappeared and those that formed an audience are asleep comfortably in their beds.

It is within that affordance that Phillips and the Flame Collective have brought forward a thinking piece, a connection through to those bigger stories formed from and respectful of the foundations of memory in Boorloo (Perth) on boodja (Country), in Whadjuk nation amidst a spirituality (South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council, 2020b) which causes those who care enough to declare the Noongar as;

“... traditional owners of the land I currently live and work on, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. Always has been, always will be, Aboriginal land.” - Cara Phillips, 2020.



The Final Act - Emotional Farewells
Photography by Alexander Hayes. (4 Feb, 2020)

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