

## PRITHVI VARATHARAJAN

### *Interview with Mike Ladd on ABC RN's Poetica (1997-2014)*

*Poetica* was a weekly poetry program broadcast on ABC Radio National from 1997 to 2014. The program was founded and hosted by the poet and broadcaster Mike Ladd. While there has been a long history of poetry on ABC radio since the 1930s (see *Poetica's* program for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ABC Radio, broadcast on 30 June 2007 – the transcript is available online), *Poetica* was different to most other radio poetry programs, not just in Australia but in the world. It was a sonically complex program, featuring readings of poems – sometimes by actors, and sometimes by poets – embedded in rich soundscapes, typically made up of nature recordings, music from commercially released albums (or sometimes commissioned specifically for a show), digital sound effects, and framing commentary from poets and their peers. Other English-language radio and podcast poetry shows tend to focus on voice exclusively – readings by the poet, with discussion – so *Poetica* was unusual in its aesthetic make-up.

The program had a wide reach: at its peak it was heard by 90,000 listeners each week, as Ladd tells me in this interview. It made poetry accessible to the general public in Australia (in fact one of the aims set out in its program brief is to “take poetry to parts of Australia where there is no access to poetry performance and events”). All of this makes *Poetica* a fascinating cultural product. I've just completed a PhD thesis which looks specifically at *Poetica's* representations of Australian identity in its episodes on Australian poets, but in this interview with Mike Ladd I took a broader look at the program. Mike and I discussed many aspects of *Poetica*, including its founding, its sonic composition, their use of actors, how they selected Australian poetry, and the program's contributions to Australian literary culture.

**When *Poetica* was on air it was unusual in the English-speaking world, because of the way it presented poems in a sonically rich environment. You had things like *Poetry Please* on BBC Radio 4 and the *Poetry Foundation* podcasts – readings and discussions. Do you have a sense of what else is out there now that's comparable?**

I would say that it was unique. At the time there were some discussion programs of poetry around, or poetry requests, like you say, like *Poetry Please* on the BBC. Radio France did do some poetry features, but everything I knew in the English-speaking world was more of a discussion or a talking-heads type of program. Very little of that performative, sound-rich space that *Poetica* tried to create.

These days there are a few poetry podcasts around. *The New Yorker* does one, but that is just two poets, mostly American poets, talking. And one of them is Paul Muldoon, who's the poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, and he's basically interviewing a contributor about their poem. *The Poetry Foundation* podcast has higher production values, but again, very American in emphasis. And there's *The Guardian* poetry podcast, and that's one poet talking about another poet's work. That has quite a good production but the format's a bit dull, I think. It's one poet saying why I love this particular poem by somebody else, and then analysing

the poem – a bit like what we used to do on the ABC before *Poetica*. I don't think there's anything quite like *Poetica* around the planet at the moment.

**So tell me about *Poetica*'s founding in 1997 – about what preceded it, and how it came about.**

Well what happened was that around 1994 there was a break in the continuity of poetry on ABC radio. We'd had poetry on air probably for the whole of our existence, but there was a show called *Poetry Feature* (1986-1994) which was axed, and there was no poetry on ABC radio at that time. I was a sound engineer, just about to become a producer, and I jumped up and down about it. I said, "we're betraying our brief, we're betraying the Charter – we should be doing poetry". And the then-head of Arts, Chris Westwood, said: "alright, you do it." She made me something called Poetry Coordinator. But that had no budget, and no real authority; it was a very difficult job, where I had to basically make short poetry items, and try and persuade *Breakfast* and *Drive* and programs like that to play them. I did have some success, but it wasn't very satisfactory.

Then in 1995 a show came along called *The Box Seat*. It was run out of the drama department – by then I'd joined the drama department – and it was a daily program where you had dramas and comedies, and they wanted a poetry feature. So we did one poetry feature each week for this show, and it became quite popular. It was one of the more popular segments of *The Box Seat*. In 1997 RN cut *The Box Seat* when they were downsizing drama, but they wanted to keep the poetry – and that led to the formation of *Poetica*. It grew out of the team that was making *The Box Seat* poetry show, which was myself, Krystyna Kubiak and Jaroslav Kovaricek (in *Poetica*'s last two years, from 2012 to 2014, it was me and the drama producer Justine Sloane-Lees). Kovaricek had made a program called *Inner Space* on ABC Classic FM, which was very musical. He had a degree in musicology from Charles University in Prague, and he was very interested in psycho-acoustics. He was an influence on *Poetica*, I would say. I had also worked for *The Listening Room*, which was ABC Classic FM's experimental and acoustic arts program for many years (1988-2003). I think some of that sensibility came across to *Poetica* too.

**What were your hopes for *Poetica*? What did you want to do with it?**

I wanted to survive our first year! We tried really hard to be an exciting program in that first year, because we didn't know if we'd get another chance. I also wanted to show how powerful and valuable poetry could be to an audience that didn't get to hear it much, or was fed a false image of it. Mainstream media, like TV comedies, often portray poets as self-absorbed, soppy, gormless, or irrelevant. I wanted to give people beautiful, rich language, and another way of thinking – one that's often missing in our prosaic public discourse.

I also wanted to show people how gutsy poetry can be – to wake them up a bit and put on strong social commentary in a different mode: not news or journalism, but a whole other language. RN is very left brain: analysis, discussion, explanation. *Poetica* was right brain: Association, mood, feeling, rhythm: a different sort of intelligence.

**In the *Poetica* brief it says that you aimed to include "60% contemporary Australian content; 40% drawn from other sources – classic and contemporary". How did you decide which contemporary Australian poets' work to make programs on? What were your criteria?**

Put simply, we selected poetry for broadcast which we felt would make good radio and would hold the national audience described in our brief. This audience included poetry specialists, but also embraced the general RN listenership. We were looking for poetry that had something to say, captured a time, a place, an emotion, said it with brilliant language, avoided cliché and had social and political significance. Based on ratings, audience letters, calls, and online comments we developed our instinct for this. We looked for gender balance and a mixture of styles from formal and literary to performative. There were some poets

who appeared often: John Kinsella, Dorothy Porter, Geoff Page, Robert Adamson, Les Murray, Jordie Albiston, Anthony Lawrence, etc., but we definitely looked for people we hadn't already done. I wanted the show to be a bit of a surprise each week and a contrast to the week before, so we'd have Beowulf one week and Nick Cave the next. As well as features, *Poetica* produced edited recordings of live readings, poetry music hybrids, verse drama and radio-phonetic poems which we believed would hold the audience over the 36 minute duration of the program.

We always looked for quality writing, but favoured more accessible poetry. Poetry that could be mostly understood on the first listen – all you often get in radio! So we didn't do much non-syntactical or abstract poetry. We kept it pretty concrete and image rich, so the listener could see something in their mind's eye from what they heard. *Poetica* privileged the ear. We were actively trying to develop "radio poetry" not just documenting poetry on radio, so we were looking for material that would work well in a mix of sound, music, readings and interview. We favoured published material, but not only from the bigger eastern states publishers. We tried to spread the net widely to all states and territories and smaller presses. We took note of who was winning the poetry prizes and who was appearing at the festivals, but not overly so. Often there was a big gulf between what wins prizes and grants in the Australian poetry scene and what would work for a general ABC listenership. We dabbled with the edgy and experimental (e.g. Jayne Fenton Keane, Jas H Duke and Pi O) and the difficult (e.g. Gig Ryan, MTC Cronin, Kinsella's trickier stuff) but in general I'd say we were slightly conservative (poetically not politically) in order to survive in the mainstream media environment of RN which is more dominated by journalism than literature per se.

**The *Poetica* website used to say – until it was archived – that you wanted to let the poetry speak for itself. Can you explain what you mean by that? Because there was framing commentary around the poetry readings – but I guess you mean you weren't explaining the content of the poetry.**

Correct, yeah. A lot of *The Poet's Tongue* – an ABC radio program that ran from 1957 to 1986 – was like this: here is a poem by Robert Browning. You hear the poem, and then: "In this poem, what he means by this is this, and this image means this..." There'd be more of an educational focus, whereas ours was more performative. Yes we would put things in context, but we did far less of actually explaining the poem line by line, or image by image, and would instead have an interview with the poet either side of a reading, which talked about the context in which it was written, or had an oblique connection with their biography, perhaps. So less of a lecture and more of a listening experience.

**Can you say more about the role of sound in *Poetica*?**

It was very important – crucial, really. It was very important for mood setting, for spacing the poetry – you can't just read 40 minutes of poetry back to back on radio and expect to have a general audience still there at the end. It would sound very dry, I think, to most people. A good poem you need to think about for a while, and especially when you only hear it and haven't got it there in front of you. You need to let the reverberations of it die. So we'd often have a spacing process, have some music between poems and perhaps some interview or natural sound, to let the listener absorb the poem.

We didn't always layer in sound – some poems were better off without – but I think the vast majority of the audience liked that sound mix (although a few didn't like the amount of sound we used – we did have some complaints from people who said, "I don't want to hear any sound underneath poems"). And in fact I think it helped bring the program to a bigger audience. To people who sat back and listened to it almost like a movie soundtrack. So they could see the images in the poems, and they could also get a kind of mood from the music around those images. I mean we chose the music very carefully, we didn't just put anything in, so the whole thing was like a mental movie. I actually believe that brought us to a younger audience and a wider audience, by having that approach, than if we'd gone for a more formal, discursive, lecture kind of program.

**You often used actors to read poems, as well as or instead of poets. Can you explain why you did this?**

There were several reasons. Sometimes the poet wasn't available - either they were dead, or they were elderly and not available to come into a studio, something like that, or in some cases they weren't a particularly great reader. In cases where they were good readers we sometimes used actors plus poet, to give it some vocal variety. I would say we usually tried to have at least one poem in the show, if possible, read by the poet themselves, just so that people could hear the actual voice of the composer of the work. I think that was important, and gave them something special.

But a good actor can really bring out the imagery of the poem, and the meaning of it, and the music in the language. Voice is so critical to poetry, and I think that's why poetry was successful on radio, in that that's what you've got: the focus is very much on the voice. On TV you have distractions: what image should we show while the poem's happening. But on radio the pictures are up to the words, the listener's mind, and the voice of the reader. Good actors are just excellent at bringing out the imagery within a poem, and the ideas within a poem. So I think it was a matter of variety but also about what best served the poetry as a listening experience.

And I mean some actors aren't particularly suited to reading poetry, but some are very good at it. They're usually actors who read poetry. There are a lot of actors who have a very good poetic sensibility and understand the craft and understand the rhythms and understand the imagery, and they're the ones you want.

**I think *Poetica's* use of actors was radical, in a way. In the reception context for lyric poetry there's a purist attitude that says: "we must hear the poem in the poet's voice – it's the authentic voice." Obviously your listener feedback proves that wrong – listeners enjoyed readings by others besides the poet, didn't they?**

Definitely, yeah. I have struck that myself, from poets – some say, "oh no, I can't bear anyone else to read my poetry: I should be reading it." I heard a comment from Alan Gould who once said, "a poet might not read their work well, but they always read it right." And I thought: but Alan, if they're not reading it well, they're still not doing it a good service, are they? They might know the meaning of it, but if they do a dreary reading, it's really not helping. I think there is a bit of conservatism around only the poet reading, and I think that's wrong. It's almost like saying only a composer can play their piece on a piano, and that's not right. It's a score as well.

**In my PhD I looked at the clause in the ABC Charter that says its programming should "contribute to a sense of national identity." How do you think you interpreted and implemented that as you worked on *Poetica*?**

I took seriously the old saying "if you want to understand a country, read its poets." In many ways I think simply by keeping a program on air for 18 years that was 60% Australian poetry, we were contributing to a sense of national identity. I did often ask myself when selecting poetry, "what has this got to say about our times, our place, who we are?" We ran an annual series from about 2000 onwards called "Round the Nation" that addressed these questions as answered by contemporary Australian poets from every corner of the country. We were very interested in how indigenous poets might answer and also poets who did not come from an English-speaking background, for example Ouyang Yu or Dimitris Tsaloumas. We also wanted to go beyond the halls of academe. What do factory worker poets have to say ("9-2-5")? Medical poets ("Verbal Medicine")? Poets who are also musicians (our "audio/file/poets" series)? Also in selecting a lot of Australian work in our international series that addressed bigger themes (The Seasons, The Spectrum, Seven Deadly Sins, Cardinal Points, The Senses, The Elements) we were able to look at how an Australian

idea of Summer, or Red, or Envy or East, or Hearing, or Fire, might differ from a European or American, African or Asian sense of those things. “Australian Parodies” showed our sense of humour. Features on the haiku and the villanelle in Australia looked at how we as Australians approach those traditional forms from other cultures. *Poetica* broadcast a lot of Australian landscape and environmental poetry too, of farms, forests and cities. *Poetica* also had several programs based on Australian history – for example, Geoff Page’s “The Extra Panel”, and Jordie Albiston’s “Dreaming Transportation.”

**What about the clause which says that the ABC should make programs that “reflect the cultural diversity of ... the Australian community” – was that in your mind when you worked on *Poetica*?**

Yes, it was in my mind. *Poetica* was internationalist and multicultural. We did approximately 40 bi-lingual programs, in dozens of languages including Greek, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Bahasa, but also languages such as Persian, Slovenian, Navajo, Welsh, Catalan and even Mayan! These were mainly poets from outside of Australia writing in their mother tongue, that then different language groups within Australia could appreciate. We also regularly focussed on contemporary Australian poets with a non-Anglo heritage. Ouyang Yu was one of those, but there were many more: Roshanak Amrein, Lidija Cvetkovic, Afief Ismail, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Pi O, Ali Alizadeh, Omar Musa, Miriam Wei Wei Lo, to name some. We did a program on middle-eastern and African refugee poets, and another on young writers from “NESB” (non-English speaking backgrounds) as it used to be called. We also featured indigenous poets: Samuel Wagan Watson, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Oodgeroo, Kevin Gilbert and many others. We featured contemporary Asian Australian poets introduced by Adam Aitken and Michelle Cahill. One of our final programs was to be “Southern Sun, Aegean Light” the poetry of second generation Greek Australians, but we were axed before we could get it to air. A shorter version ended up on the RN feature program *Earsshot* which became the new home for some poetry features after the demise of *Poetica*.

**Tell me about the demise of *Poetica*. What caused it?**

Tony Abbott’s \$300 million budget cut to the ABC certainly didn’t help. But that wasn’t the only reason. It was also upper management’s handling of that budget cut – they didn’t have to cut a show like *Poetica*, they could’ve done other things. So a lot of it came from our own management, and their decisions about future directions for RN. And this is another sadness to me – you have to look at the general loss of specialisation on Radio National over the last decade. We used to give air time to radio plays, short stories, autobiographies, book readings, poems. We still discuss literature – we do interviews with authors and discuss their books – but we don’t actually broadcast much literature itself. And I think that’s a shame; I think Australian culture’s diminished by these decisions. And listeners still miss *Poetica* – I still get letters about *Poetica* all this time later, saying we wish we could have it back.

**Can you describe some of your own *Poetica* productions that are your favourites?**

That’s a hard one! Well, I would say that one of my favourites was “The Golden Gate” with Vikram Seth, which is still available online. It was probably the biggest project I ever did. It was 4 hours long – a novel in verse inspired by Pushkin, written in his sonnet form, but all set in San Francisco. I actually recorded all the sound effects for it when I was in San Francisco. I worked with a cast of 30 actors, and including Vikram Seth himself as narrator, recorded via satellite from London. And then I edited it all together. It was a big co-production with CBC Radio Canada, so it was broadcast in both Canada and Australia. That was a fun and challenging and exciting production, certainly the biggest thing I’ve ever done.

But there were many favourites, really. “9-2-5, the poetry of work”, working with Pi O and his crew; Jennifer Maiden, “Acoustic Shadow”; A feature I made on the late John Anderson; Glenn Colquhoun, Kiwi poet; “Guarding the Cenotaph,” which was a feature I made with Jennifer Maiden; a feature I made on Michael Harnett, the Irish poet; John Forbes, which was a co-production I made with Clea Woods that I particularly enjoyed; “Love Poetry of Ancient Egypt”; the poems of Patrick Kavanagh; “The Extra Panel”

which was a feature I made with Geoff Page and the Aboriginal artist Pooaraar; “The Villanelle in Australia”; a feature on the late Dimitris Tsaloumas – I stayed with Dimitris in Melbourne to make that feature; “Tidalectics”, which is a piece I made on a poet who was working on Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands; “The Sixth Creek” with Rachael Mead; “On Hammock Hill” with Mark Tredinnick, walking around the Wingecarribee River with him. They were all terrific fun to make and got me out and about.

### **Did you consider *Poetica* to be political, in any sense of the word?**

Yes, *Poetica* was political. While I didn’t ask poets who they voted for – and we did feature some poets who are known to be conservatives (e.g. Les Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann) – I’d say a majority of poets we featured were on the left politically, but then I think a lot of creative people tend to be. You wouldn’t necessarily know that from the program though – the poetry was about other things. It was much deeper than the old left/right divide. We did some overtly political programs: “What I heard about Iraq” was an anti-Iraq war show for example. There was a lot of politics built into some of the indigenous poetry of say Ali Cobby Eckermann, Jack Davis, or Oodgeroo. Judith Wright’s poetry had a strong environmental message as did Louise Crisp’s Snowy Mountain program “Grasses”. Renee Pettitt Schipp worked on Christmas Island teaching creative writing and English to local students and asylum seekers held in detention. Her program “Tidalectics” was about the natural beauty of the Indian Ocean islands juxtaposed with the cruelty of the Australian immigration detention system.

You could say “where’s the balance?” Well the fact is you’d be hard put to find pro-Iraq war poems or pro-off-shore-detention poems. Those opinions were expressed loudly elsewhere, but not in poetry. Interesting that. The need for “balance” in the ABC was network-wide, so we could come in under that.

### **What do you think *Poetica*’s contributions to literary culture in Australia have been?**

It’s hard for me to know that, but I think we did bring poetry to a much broader audience than it would’ve had if we hadn’t been there. I don’t want to overstate it, but at our peak we reached 90,000 listeners a week, and we averaged about 60,000. So we were certainly getting it out there to far more people than the typical poetry magazine or poetry column. It was a truly national platform. The other thing is that we were not only bringing the subject of poetry, but the poet’s voice – by that I mean the reading of the poem, whether it be read by the poet or by an actor – to a broad audience right across the country. And I think we did contribute to the literary culture that way. We took poetry back from being a printed experience to its roots, which are oral and aural. So we were actually rediscovering, in a way, the origins of poetry.

And we paid poets – we gave poets an income – we provided work for actors, for freelance radio makers and musicians. I think we also helped fairly new voices on their way. We mostly focused on published works, so I’m not saying we completely discovered new poets, but for example Ali Cobby Eckermann’s first book *Little Bit Long Time* – we produced a feature on that, and I think that helped her a lot to get national recognition. Poets often are recognised in their own very small circles, in their own cities. It’s like Auden’s comment – that poets are like valley cheeses. They’re very local, really. But I think a program like *Poetica* helped take that local voice and spread it around the whole country; it enabled poets to be more broadly recognised. Other than that I’d say it’s up to others to decide what our impact was on literary culture in Australia.

### **How did the poets you featured respond to your treatment of their work?**

Overwhelmingly they were positive. I think poetry can be a lonely business, and the poets were excited to have some attention, and to work with a production team – to hear something highly produced based on their work. Over the 18 years we were on air I can’t remember more than one or two poets who said, “I didn’t like the way that was read.” Almost universally, people were very pleased to be on the show. And I heard just anecdotally from people that it increased their poetry sales. I’ve heard that from a number of

book shops around the country, that if a poet had been on *Poetica*, people would come in the next day to the shop looking for a copy of the book. I took several calls from book shops saying, “we suddenly had all these people running in for so-and-so’s book.” At least anecdotally I think we helped poetry sales. I think it helped people’s profiles enormously. We certainly had plenty of poets and their publishers sending us material hoping to be on the program. Because let’s face it, there aren’t too many mainstream media opportunities for poets, are there? So I think we were an important part of that area.

**What thoughts come to mind now when you reflect on *Poetica*’s run on RN?**

Well it was a good long run. Many radio shows don’t last 18 years on air, and we’ve left a very good strong archive. I’m sad that it’s gone. I was quite depressed when it was axed. It was a big part of my life – I have to say that. But they can’t take away from us that we did achieve a good output for a long time, and I really hope that the audio stays available to listeners online, into the future. I’m also very grateful for that opportunity, to be on air for nearly two decades with the program. I’m grateful to all the poets and actors and musicians, and fellow radio producers, and to the audience.

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