

TRANSCRIPT FOR INTERVIEW WITH RAMAS MCRAE

This interview was recorded via Zoom and features Amy Tsilemanis interviewing Ramas McRae, with Auslan/English interpretation by Paul Houston.

Amy: Hello everybody. It's Amy Tsilemanis here with Gather with Minerva's Books and Ideas and I'm excited to be chatting with the wonderful Ramas McRae. This is a bit different for us, so I'm excited. I was just saying I'm a little bit nervous, my heart is pumping, but that's what it's all about, bringing together passionate, creative people for Gather. So Ramas, a big welcome.

Ramas: Thank you, Amy. It's wonderful to be here. I'm really looking forward to being a part of your radio show and this podcast.

Amy: So to start do you want to introduce yourself and tell us a bit about what you do?

Ramas: Sure. Happy to introduce myself. So first up, I'll just let you know that I'm a Deaf person, my name's Ramas McRae and you are hearing Paul Houston's voice. He's the interpreter for today. If you're waiting, thinking, where's Ramas? I'm here. But while we're talking in two different languages- English and Auslan- this is being interpreted so there may be a time delay from time to time.

So, with that, I have a sign name for Ramas. Deaf people have sign names, they're important.

The sign name, you may think well that looks like a Wiggles sign. It's not, I'm not a Wiggle. Ok, it's Ramas, and I'm coming to you from the lands of Naarm.

Now, I actually was born, not in Australia, some people may think I look like an Aussie, are you related to Ned Kelly? You're a Ned Kelly look alike, well, I actually was born in Lithuania, North Eastern Europe. If you're unsure about your geography ok if you can visualise Sweden, we're across the sea from Sweden, or a neighbour to Russia to its West. So I grew up in a family of deaf people. My parents are both deaf, so deafness is part of our genetic history.

Like I said, I was born in Lithuania. My first language is Lithuanian sign language. I grew up in my early life in a Communist era, until Communism fell, maybe at the age of 10 in the Soviet Union I still remember that. After Communism then the world just opened up. It was a very different life experience. We were very hidden. The world was opened up, it became a different much bigger zone. So I think of myself, you know in some ways being Columbus. Columbus arrives and discovers something called the New World, I didn't know the world existed outside of our own one.

Anyway, long story short, after I finished studying and graduated university, I moved to the United Kingdom, lived there for a number of years, did a few different things and I decided I want to go travelling and see the rest of the world. And I always wanted to come to Australia and I should tell you, it's very hard to get a visa to come to Australia. At that time, I was able to organise a working holiday for about three years, and that working holiday, you know I said to my friends and family. I'll be back within one year, ok, don't worry about me, I've got things to do, put my stuff in storage. Just took a backpack with me. I thought to be in Australia for maybe 3 weeks, see the country, and move on. A friend said to me at the time, Australia's a big country Ramas. I said, really? He said it's a big country, there are mountains and trees. I've seen movies. Have you seen the movie Australia yourself Amy?

Amy: I have not.

Ramas: Nicole Kidman, and others. Well, it shows Australia being this red, desolate desert in the Northern Territory, and I thought it was dry, you know, just this dry country, and I was told no, there's lots to do and see and it's not all dry desert. And I said ok well, 3 weeks becomes 3 months and 3 months later, well actually nine years later I'm still here, so there you have it. So I've lived in the country for 9 years. I work here, I met a beautiful woman. We got married and we have a child together and I now call Australia home. I still miss Europe but I live in Australia and love both.

In terms of what I'm doing now Amy, I'm a lecturer, an Auslan lecturer at La Trobe University. So I talk about Deaf history, Deaf culture, linguistics and also teach Australian Sign Language, Auslan.

Amy: Amazing and what's that like?

Ramas: Well, it's challenging particularly living in a Covid era, where everything's online this is a two-dimensional experience, you know, you're looking at a screen. Ok, whereas if you're a face to face, it's a lot easier to teach and looking at students on a screen likewise, it's hard for them. It's a challenge teaching Auslan, ok it's a three-dimensional language.

I have a real diversity of students, and it's wonderful to see people learn Auslan and be able to communicate with deaf people anywhere and everywhere. We've also set up an Instagram page, at University La Trobe #UniversityofLaTrobeAuslan and that's available to everyone, not only Auslan students at La Trobe, so it's wonderful to see people learning Auslan and being able to interact with someone at a cafe or workplace or fellow student or someone in their community.

Amy: That's great. I have had a little look at that. It's good, good fun. And of course with Covid it's become very important to have the interpretation during press conferences and things hasn't it?

Ramas: Yeah, definitely. That information's important. You may be thinking, aren't deaf people reading newspapers or looking at things online or reading the captions on television. Deaf people's first language in Australia is Auslan, Australian Sign Language, so that's information received in Auslan, that's our first language not in our second language which is English and that's in written form obviously via captions or online or in newspapers. So I'll give you a simple example in Darwin Northern Territory they had an announcement that said tonight, we're locking down, right, the Chief Minister said that, and deaf people were like what lock down, for what? There was a lack of access to information in Auslan for deaf people. A lot of deaf people have English as a second language, so there are dramatic impacts when information is not presented in their first language. So once the Covid pandemic eases we want to see Auslan in the public domain including on television, not only in times of emergency in pandemic, but part of our everyday life here in Australia.

Amy: Yes, I hope to see that too.

So talking about visual culture, let's talk about your life as a filmmaker as well. You've been doing lots of interesting things lately. There was something in the St Kilda film festival. Do you want to tell us about that?

Ramas: Sure Amy. Well it was such a wonderful experience to be involved in. The name of the movie was called Dry Fire, ok So this short film, Dry Fire. I myself am a filmmaker, you're right. I've also acted in a few different pieces, but this was a team effort. The outfit asked me to be an Auslan consultant, and advise on the script and also the character, to ensure that it was appropriate and fitting and you know the script was fit for purpose and I really pay my great respects and take my hat off to this team. This was all part of the process to ensure that all the research was done was all culturally appropriate and was done as a part of the whole creative process not after the fact, having to retro fit or change things which are already set up. So as I said, being involved in the script development process and cultural consulting I then was told we believe you should be a co-director. That was a huge honour, and I greatly appreciated that opportunity. That really hit me, that took me by surprise, so it was wonderful to be involved, also to be involved with deaf characters, such a wonderful experience being involved in that all together. Yes, it did show at the St Kilda Film Festival and the young deaf girl, who was the star there, won an award. So I'm just thrilled, from so many different points of view, not only that the film was shown, but a young deaf girl had an opportunity to act, and she won an award and that work's going to be seen. So many doors have been opened as a result of that film.

Amy: That's amazing. What do you think visual storytelling can do? I've watched a few of your things like the beautiful, is it Precious Treasures? What do you love about filmmaking?

Ramas: Hmm, ok well why I'm interested in filmmaking. Artists, for example can express themselves through their particular medium, whether it be painting, or sculpting or drawing. For me, it's about communication, language, on film. It's also about poetry, self expression. And many deaf people who use sign language to communicate visually and spatially and we want to see things represented in a visual manner, and that's one of the driving forces behind my filmmaking work.

Amy: Well I recommend people go and check it out. There's a few you can watch online. And we're very excited at Gather to have Ramas making a film for us too so keep an eye out for that. Yeah, what is it like translating things from an aural or written form into something visual?

Ramas: Ok, Let me think about that. There are two different tracks here. So you can either take the interpreting path or track or the translation path. So with translation you have more time, in this case with an English script. To translate that into Auslan you have a lot more time. You're thinking about information that's going to be presented. Is it structurally, grammatically correct? Key messages... when you're doing interpretation like now, this is real time. Ok? There can be some preparation involved, but it's live and it's a very different experience translating as opposed to interpreting, simultaneously. Or you may have a deaf interpreter working as well, so a deaf interpreter may need, when working with an Auslan interpreter like now more time to unpack information. so it is accessible in Auslan, so I take my hat off to Auslan interpreters. They do a lot of work from a linguistic point of view, listening for information in English and interpreting that into Auslan and conversely watching Auslan and turning that into spoken English so when a deaf person works in that team, as a deaf interpreter they're watching the Auslan and then they're unpacking it even more into a more easily accessible form of Auslan, so all of that, on the film, on the screen is valuable to me. And I can tell you they all take a lot of time, they're all labour intensive.

Amy: Well, I'm looking forward to seeing what you come up with and it's all about making the podcast more accessible, which I'm learning about at the moment. Would you have any wisdom to share about how we can be better at making things like podcasts or beyond that more accessible for deaf people or hard of hearing?

Ramas: Yeah that's a good question Amy. Ok, well clearly we need to have an Auslan interpreter provided because the deaf community want to access information in its first language which is Australian Sign Language.

If you provide a transcript Amy with your podcast, that's great. That's good too for people who are confident, or competent English Auslan bilinguals. Some deaf people are, some deaf people are not. If it's already there, and we don't have to ask for it,

request it, that's ideal. Having Auslan interpreters available, having information presented in Auslan. If there's time and funding available, you may also want to consider having two interpreters, so one interpreter is performing the role of interviewer and the other interpreter is the interviewee so I understand that takes more time or money rather than have one interpreter perform both roles, which is what they're doing now which is confusing, and also if it's a long response, it can be quite confusing because you're basically just seeing one voice, inverted commas, so to understand who is speaking, taking on a character or role. Two interpreters is ideal, to visually represent that.

Amy: Well thank you so much for your generosity. I've got lots to learn, but I'm loving the journey.

Ramas: You're most welcome. We want to welcome you Amy and others into our Deaf and hard of hearing world.

Amy: Amazing. I know you're working hard on a festival at the moment. Do you want to tell us about that?

Ramas: Yeah I am. Well this weekend is the start of the National Week of Deaf People and the Deaf community here in Australia are very proud to celebrate. And I'm involved in Australia and as part of that, I'm organising a number of different events. And of course, with Covid it's online. It's an online, or virtual event festival, Flow Festival, that includes Codas (children of deaf adults) because they obviously have native signing ability in Auslan so we're all coming together, celebrating identity, showcasing our work and our art and there's a whole variety of work there. There's painting, photography, film, dance, music, and there are workshops as well at the Flow festival. You can learn how to make something, there's lots of hands-on activities. They're live as well as virtual. Many of them are captioned so I encourage people to get involved in the Flow Festival. It's a free event as well. It's free, you've got to like that right? You can organise your tickets through the Flow Festival website (flowfestivalaustralia.com) And take it from there. So we greatly appreciate the sponsorship from the Arts Council of Australia and a number of other Deaf organisations that have funded this to make it happen. So we really are looking forward intently for the Deaf and hard of hearing community to

be able to showcase our identity, culture and language, so you're all welcome, the more the merrier!

Amy: Sounds wonderful. Thank you so much I did want to just ask to close. Sorry, my voice sounded like a robot for a second... Your business, I suppose, is called Hands to Communicate

Ramas: That's ok if you sound like a robot, I don't hear your robotic voice Amy so all good here. [Amy does robot dance]

Amy: Yeah the idea of using hands to communicate. I don't know if you'd like to say a few words about that to close as well.

Ramas: Ok, thank you. Thank you for asking, Amy, about my business- Hands to Communicate. It's a side business where I provide language accessibility, access so language consultancy, tutoring, translation, film translation, it's about opening up access opportunities for all people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Amy: Beautiful. Thank you so much. I've learnt my [attempts to sign thank you]

Ramas: I like to see you learn that sign there Thank you for sharing your sign for thank you Amy.

Amy: And I hope to learn more in the future. Thank you so much. We'll talk to you more soon about your film, that will be featuring on our website and all the best with Flow Festival, how exciting.

Ramas: Yes, thank you, you coming Amy? We look forward to seeing you there.

Amy: Yep. Thanks so much Ramas, and Paul

Ramas: Thank you, it's been a pleasure. Goodbye!

The text below is from the video description:

Well! Amy is busy working on the second half of Season 1 of Gather with Minerva's Books & Ideas, a podcast exploring the lives of books and the ideas they ignite and illuminate. With support from Creative Victoria, the podcast is working on accessibility upgrades, including a new short film in Auslan by filmmaker Ramas McRae to welcome more people to the show- out in December!

In the meantime, Amy interviews the fabulous Ramas here, about his life as an Auslan lecturer, a filmmaker and general legend in the Deaf community. He also tells us about the amazing Flow Festival that is happening this weekend!

FLOW festival will deliver a vibrant and unique festival of Deaf Arts by the Australian Deaf Community from 18th to 21st September 2021 online. It will showcase Auslan, Australian Sign Language through many different artistic forms. Auslan storytelling, Deaf Slam Poetry, dance, theatre, short films screening, children's art activities, workshops, artists talk, Deaf indigenous storytelling/art workshops, Queer Arts and Deafblind Arts are some of exciting art events planned by FLOWFestival 2021.

All info and tickets here, and as Ramas says in the interview- It's all FREE, you've gotta like that! <https://www.flowfestivalaustralia.com/>

Other things we chat about to check out:

The film Dry Fire <https://dryfiremovie.com/our-story/>

Ramas' film The Precious Treasure

<https://www.artsaccess.com.au/creating-change/the-other-film-festival/two-degrees/the-precious-treasure/>

La Trobe University Auslan Instagram Account
https://www.instagram.com/latrobeuni_auslan/?hl=en

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<https://gather.buzzsprout.com/>

Full episode 5 will be out on October 1st themed Adaptation, with guest artist Gelareh Pour, book seeds including The Shape of Sound by Fiona Murphy, and lots more.

All episodes will have available transcriptions, along with website upgrades for better accessibility by December, we're working on it! Thanks for watching :)