



An Audience with the Audience

Do young people think of themselves as young people? Do they think of themselves as young audiences? Do they seek out work that is by, for or about their own age group? Do they care whether a piece is made specifically for or by young people? And how do their views compare with the views of the theatre companies that make the work? Chris Thompson reports.

Last year's Melbourne Festival included in its program two pieces specifically for or by young people – 'Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights', a youth theatre piece from St Martins, and 'Play Dirty', a theatre for young people (TYP) piece from Arena Theatre. Both shows enjoyed great houses and, as Festival pieces, reached an audience that was both young and not-so-young. There were many other performances in the festival that, although not specifically intended for young people, still attracted their fair share of young audience members. I had the good fortune to attend one such non-TYP show when it played to an audience of Year nine and ten students.

The show was Kate Champion and Force Majeure's creation, 'Same, Same But Different', a beautiful, lyrical, whimsical piece that explores love and interdependency in twenty-to-thirty-something relationships, as well as in a more enduring partnership well into the frailties of old age. The performance mixes physicality, dance and movement with theatre, sound and projections in a largely non-narrative form that is both challenging and engaging. For me, it was one of the highlights of the festival, and one of the few times where technology served the performance, rather than hollowing it out or overwhelming its humanness.

This was the first time 'Same, Same But Different' had performed for a young audience and as we took our seats, a safe row or two behind the secondary school throng, the Director, Kate Champion, and the Production Manager Geoff Cobham wondered out loud how these fourteen and fifteen year olds would respond to a show that explored the dynamics of relationships a good ten to fifty years older than them. 'I wasn't fearful or anxious', Kate told me afterwards, 'just curious how they'd react... I actually think that sometimes younger minds more easily let go of narrative. They can do the associative visual thing.' And they certainly did. I couldn't help thinking that, somewhere in this audience, there was bound to be one or two young people here who, in years to come, would look back on this show as being a significant moment in their development as either theatre practitioners or avid audience members. As I watched them applauding the curtain call, and chattering their way out of the Playhouse, a number of thoughts about young audiences crossed my mind.

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I put these and other questions to a number of young people, and here's what they had to say...

Sally Christie, Celeste Boan and Prue Takle are all 15 and attend Fribank Grammar School in South Eastern Melbourne. They were in that audience and weren't at all fussed that the content wasn't specific to their age. On the contrary, they enjoyed the stories that were told in the piece and, after they got the hang of it, responded to the non-narrative structure. Prue, in particular, loved the production elements. 'I loved the set and how they used it... I loved the projections on the screen, the lighting was awesome... the different uses of audio...' She also liked the structure and content. 'Some people would have said "this isn't a play"... but I like anything that uses something differently. Love stories are always going to be relevant to younger audiences. You can make the connection with the older couple... You think of your grandparents... your mum and dad... Sometimes things like that can introduce you to the idea that they can still be quite a lot younger than you think.' Celeste found that, 'It made me think about things in the future... How in one age group you can get the mature side and the not so mature side...' Sally also liked the subject matter. 'It has to be about a good topic, it can't just be about nothing.'

To a certain extent, Sally, Celeste and Prue all think of themselves as young people, but is the same true of others in the under 26 age group?

On the other side of town, Platform Youth Theatre exists for young people in the Northern suburbs. Michael Carmody (23), Rebecca Catterall (22) and Marline Zaibak (21) are all members and whilst they didn't see 'Same, Same But Different', they have been seeing lots of theatre as part of 'Short Attention Span', a Platform project designed to support young people as they attend a range of performances with mentors who help them grow in their knowledge of contemporary performance styles and ways of storytelling. At the end of the project, they will each create a series of short (1-8 minute) performances.

Michael has been with Platform for four years and last year received an Australia Council Out & About Traineeship Grant to work with both Platform and Arena Theatre. Even though he recognises the opportunities that being a young person have given him, he still doesn't see himself that way. 'To be honest... Even when I was a teenager there was no way I would give myself that label. In a way I think there's a bit of, "Oh, we'll just put up with those kind of labels and definitions if it means that we get to do what we want"... which [for me] is to make theatre.' Rebecca finds the 'Young Person' label a bit limiting. 'You're constantly reminded that that's the case...and I guess you learn to be humble about where you're at. There's quite a few shows that I've seen, whether they're for youth or not, where I may walk away and think, "That was really crap, and I could do a better job". But when you're in that youth theatre environment, you sometimes don't really feel that you have the position to be able to say, "This is where I want to take theatre"...' Marline does think of herself as a young person - at least she did until she turned 21. Now she feels old. 'I'm 21, that's the first time I've said it out loud...but you get over that...until I'm twenty-five I'm going to exploit the whole young person thing.'

Brett Adam is Artistic Director at St Martins Youth Arts Centre. He recalls being a teenager and in his early twenties... 'I didn't see myself as a young person. I went to theatre and arts events and museums, whatever, and just saw myself as part of the general audience.' Brett can see both sides of the coin when it comes to defining young audiences. 'I have difficulty with what I consider to be a really artificial demarcation between youth and general audiences... An audience is an audience...they want to see good theatre. We marginalise young people by creating a pigeon hole for them, but on the other hand, if that doesn't happen then they can be forgotten and their voice ignored. Working here, I notice a recognition of peer involvement... There's something about

seeing their peers...themselves, on stage...it empowers them so much more.'

For some of these young people, it's the thought of turning 26 and no longer being 'officially young' that is more of a concern. Rebecca is one of those. 'I'm conscious of that, and I'm really glad I've gotten involved at this stage. I really want to soak it up...and I hope that by the time I can't be involved, I've built up the skills to go on and do other stuff. I have a friend who's 28, and she finds it really hard because she wants to get the experience and the skills...but she can't get involved in a lot of youth groups because of the age thing - even though she's sort of at the same level.' Marlene admits to being a bit scared of reaching 26. 'It means it's the end of Platform for me... But hopefully by that stage I've learned enough to be able to fend on my own.'

Young writer Chris Howlett agrees. He is fast approaching that magic number. He recently had his play, 'Lucy Devlin Has Wealth Syndrome', performed as equal winner of the St Martins short play competition. Whilst he was thrilled to see his work on stage, it left him with a strange feeling. 'Watching that play I felt incredibly old...' It'd been about ten years

So what do these young people think about youth theatre and TYP?

In all our discussions, there's an overwhelming feeling that too much of what the TYP or youth theatre they've seen is overly issue-based and not focused enough on the 'theatre'. As Rebecca says, 'When I go to youth theatre, I go with a hope that it won't be a show that's just about youth issues'. Michael admits that he used to be in a bit of denial about being involved in youth theatre. 'At Platform, it sometimes felt a bit cringey [that] we were a youth theatre company... I used to get upset, almost deny the fact that it's youth theatre, but there's no point in not embracing that and going further... Ultimately, by being a youth theatre, that's what gets everyone there together... so let's use that. [Most of our projects] wouldn't have happened if they hadn't have traded on that whole youth theatre label... It makes things happen, and you can always exceed expectations and push further than a simple label.'

For Marline, the issue of issue-based plays is a big issue. 'Sometimes [youth theatre] attacks issues in a way, like "drugs are bad" and that gets overwhelming and boring... You don't need to be shown that all the time... [Last year's Platform production



Platform Youth Theatre • Photo: Pouch Hawkes

since Chris, as a fifteen year old, had first come to St Martins. 'It almost feels like, not cheating, but like by now I should be a little fish in a big pond.'

Brett Adam believes that 'by setting the cut-off date at whatever age, you deny the reality that it's a continuum... Not just that young people grow up, but that the artform they create goes on... When's the moment that they stop being youth?'

Young actor Janine Watson sums it up best. 'I just can't believe I'm going to turn 26 and stop thinking I'm young.'

of] "Walt & The Paradise Plaza" didn't have all that stuff. I guess it was more mature, but still appealing to a younger audience...because it still had that basis of relationships. It wasn't in your face and direct, but the issues were there if you wanted them. Up until then, Platform did a lot of...very teen issue-based stuff. It was nice to be able to move into a different thing... I'll always go for something a little bit less issue-based... I'm over all those issues...'

Chris Howlett worries that TYP or youth theatre can sometimes feel like an apology. 'In my mind, it's almost like if you say "it's

theatre for young people" then you're supposed to be excusing it in some manner...or asking for it to be given some kind of concession... If you make good theatre...if there's something there that's going to engage people, then they're going to be engaged regardless of their age.'

Janine Watson (24) and Libby Sandy (23) have just completed the acting course at the National Theatre Drama School in St Kilda. Janine's brother, Tristan (22), is about to go into his third year of the same course. They pretty much agree with what the young people at Platform have to say. Tristan finds that he sees a lot of work that's not exactly youth theatre, although it's created by young people under 26 who have formed their own companies to produce Fringe shows. He feels that when those pieces deal with 'issues' it's easier for him to take. 'They're really quite specific to that certain age group, between 18 and even up to 30. There's a whole lot of issues, drugs, sex... [I like] to see what other people are making of the world. We're watching their experience of whatever issue they're dealing with rather than being given the reason why we shouldn't do it, so to speak.'

Janine often finds the issues in some TYP productions are not all that interesting to her. 'I think that young people know when they're being preached at...

You see it all the time and it's almost redundant... What they witness in films and on TV debunks the need for it. Kids have so many resources to be smarter about what's going on... I think that theatre for young people should be about theatre – something that they can't watch on TV or see in a film.'

Libby remembers seeing Ranters' production of 'Features Of Blown Youth' a few years ago. '...it was aimed at young people...[and] it had almost every kind of gritty issue for young people in it – a drug addict, a girl who was selling her body, eating disorders... Which I really enjoyed, but I think it...was probably trying to cover too much... Trying to be too gritty, too hip and cool...'

Libby's thoughts about TYP might soon become more than just theory and opinion. She's hoping to work as an actor in that field sometime this year. She hopes that she'll perform in shows that leave some of the work up to the audience. 'It's important for young people to feel like it's their say, and that it's not being shoved down their

throats.' She's realistic, though, that she could find herself smack in the middle of exactly the kind of issue-based play she's being critical of. 'It'd be hard if the framework is one that says "this is a lesson for you"... But it's a job, and if at the end of the day that's what the director wants, I would just try to...do my best as an actor, to focus on my character, and the other things – apart from the "eating disorder" or the "drug addiction" or the "bullying" – that define the character and see how one informs the other.'

What's curious is that, as far as young audiences go, it seems that it's only when they go to the theatre that the 'issue' issue exists. As Arena Theatre's Rose Myers puts it, '...music and film for young people don't need to take a moralist, didactic standpoint, but often theatre work has felt



that need, and I've never quite understood that.'

So what kind of theatre have they all been going to see?

Michael Carmody says he ends up at La Mama quite a bit, but also got to see some Melbourne Festival shows. 'I saw some big shows at the Melbourne Festival. Expensive though they were, I scammed some student tickets... I saw "Soft", "Play Dirty" and "K"... I was really looking forward to "Play Dirty" because I was at Arena when they were doing the development, and I love the company and I love what they do... It was cool, it was loud, I loved the smell of the petrol, but it left me a little empty... And likewise with "K". I still got a lot out of them... I really hate it when you see a show and just dismiss it... There's always things that I can get out of shows, and those two particularly because they were so big... But I really loved "Soft". It just stayed with me for days afterwards.'

Rebecca Catterall saw 'Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights'. 'I'd done a workshop with Brett Adam and I really wanted to see his work. I had a strong suspicion that I'd like it... And I loved it.' Prue Takle went to see John Bell's 'Richard III'. '...it was good to watch and learn from...how they grasped the characters and used the language so well...'

Marline Zaibak saw the ICE production of 'Teratology' at the old PANCH Hospital. She liked the production, but 'it was weird seeing theatre in a hospital'. She also saw the production of 'Sylvia Plath' at La Mama, where she likes to go because it '...makes you feel artsy and cool'. She also really liked Joanna Murray-Smith's play, 'Rapture' at Playbox, and hopes it might influence her own writing. 'Playbox is really cool... Very mature, it's that whole adult theatre vibe, that's what I want to get into. You go there and you feel that whole theatre aura... Wow!'

Ben Noble from St Martins saw Bangarra Dance Company's production of 'Skin'. 'I've never seen a piece of theatre that moved such a cross-section of people... Fifteen to eighty year olds were coming out crying, it was absolutely beautiful, and I just went "you can do this on stage and it's magic"...' Chris Howlett from St Martins still talks about 'Cloudstreet'. '...there were heaps of young people there and they adored it... Five hours long and it was still packed by the end...'

Janine Watson and Libby Sandy saw Zeal Theatre's 'The Stones' and agree that, for them, it is TYP at its best. As Janine says, 'That play was more about how the justice system treats young people than it was about how these kids went bad... It's not age-specific...it's how it's handled.' Tristan Watson admits that, although he goes to the theatre quite regularly, it's usually because someone else has made the decision. Whilst he'll often decide to go and see a band or a movie off his own bat, he almost never initiates a theatre outing. He saw 'The Stones' with Janine and Libby and felt very much the same. In his view, its strength was that, '...they didn't present to us whether the situation was right or wrong, they left it completely up to us... Which made it an experience of that issue...'

How, then, do the companies view their relationship to the audience?

Melbourne Theatre Company's Education Officer, Robert McDonald, says that he has three areas of focus where young audiences are concerned. One is the curriculum area, such as explorations of VCE texts, another is work the company creates for young audiences, such as their recent HotHouse

Theatre co-production of 'Second Childhood'. In those cases, Robert hopes that the MTC can challenge a young audience. 'We probably pitch at about ten percent above what we think would be right [for the audience], so we're going to grab those kids who are ready to go a bit further.' Third is the subscription season. 'We get a lot of young people. We look at what shows are going to be best given their level of emotional development... I spoke to a mother yesterday who asked me about shows for an eleven and a sixteen year old. She didn't have any problems with nudity or sex...but she didn't want them to see anything that might confuse them...or that might alienate them [from the theatre].'

Over at Playbox, Meg Upton and Margaret Steven run the Education Program. Meg Upton finds that young people 'love to come in and do workshops, but after that we very rarely see them again. I personally think that young people love making theatre, but...want to have a range of experiences across an evening or a weekend that doesn't necessarily mean they want to sit in a theatre for two hours.' In addition to introducing '3D-Fest' (a festival of new works by tertiary students) last year, Playbox is also developing a new TYP commissioning project. Three playwrights have been commissioned to write plays that, '...deal with young characters and issues that are relevant to their lives.' Meg sees the importance of this being part of the company's season, rather than being marginalised as an add-on. 'I don't just want to say, "Here's our theatre for young people piece". I'd rather say, "Here's a great piece of theatre... Come along".'

St Martins' Brett Adam is in a slightly different boat. Although, as the Australia Council's review of TYP would put it, 'work for young audiences is often produced by youth theatres using young people as participants', Brett doesn't automatically see a need for young people at St Martins to always produce work that is by or for their own age group. It was with that in mind that he programmed Gertrude Stein's 'Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights' for the Melbourne Festival. 'My major consideration is to the young people here before it is to an audience...and with scripted pieces I'm always trying to find work that they won't get to perform anywhere else.'

Although Force Majeure's Kate Champion doesn't specifically make TYP, her next project will be based on a children's book, and she'd be happy for young audiences to keep coming to her work. Nevertheless, she says she doesn't really think about her audience. 'The main thing is to make the work from the heart...and then put it out there... I definitely don't want to start thinking about who it might be for, although the one condition is that it has broad appeal without being the lowest

common denominator.' However, Kate does acknowledge that some of the reservations her peers had about the structure and style of 'Same, Same But Different' are unlikely to be shared by younger audiences. '[They] aren't so hung up on a chronological, A to Z storyline...'

Arena Theatre is a TYP company and, as such, has a more obvious focus on young audiences. However, whilst their work for primary school aged children is, by necessity, audience focused, with the more major festival works like 'Eat Your Young' and 'Play Dirty' Arena's AD, Rose Myers, is more focused on the form and content of the work than who the audience is. 'There's something about our work that's trying to engage young audiences in certain ways... There's popular culture and contemporary youth culture in both its form and content that may be of more interest to a young audience. I think it's really hard when you've got to lump audiences with demographics... A lot of upper secondary school students will really enjoy the work of the MTC, and a lot of older people come and see our shows. We take a standpoint that the audience is very sophisticated...[and] at the fore of new cultural expression... They're really literate in the way that they can 'read' across form...the work doesn't have to be more simple...it has to be more complex...'

What seems clear is that, regardless of whether a work is intended for young people or the general public, the most exciting experiences for young audiences are coming from those who are most

focused on the work, and not the audience – the idea and not the issue, the vision and not the box-office. It also seems that whilst TYP or youth theatre may be all consuming for those of us who work in the field, for those members of the audience whom we categorise as Young People, it's all just part of a rich platter of theatre experiences from which they will pick and choose for a host of reasons, the least of which seems to be how old they are.

And isn't that how it should be? Youth arts may often find itself aligned with schools, but the development of a young person's theatre experience need not be as lineal as their pathway through the education system. The wider their experience, the sharper their critical faculties, and that can only lead to a more literate, informed and astute audience who will demand higher quality work from all quarters of the theatre industry.

CHRIS THOMPSON

Thanks to: Sally Christie, Celeste Boan & Prue Takle (Firbank Grammar); Michael Carmody Rebecca Catterall & Marline Zaibak (Platform Youth Theatre), Ben Noble & Chris Howlett (St Martins) and Janine Watson, Libby Sandy & Tristan Watson (National Theatre Drama School) And to: Kate Champion & Geoff Cobham (Force Majeure), Rob Galbraith (Firbank), Brett Adam (St Martins), Kath Melbourne (Platform), Robert McDonald (MTC), Meg Upton (Playbox) and Rose Myers (Arena) ...for their contribution.

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