

Theatre for Young People in Australia

Judith McLean and Susan Richer's paper sought to provoke and prompt discussion on theatre for young people for the Theatre Board of the Australia Council in early 2001. In the context of the current debate on theatre for young people, Lowdown is pleased to publish it in full.

Over the past decade, praxis associated with young people's theatre, children's theatre and youth arts has evolved in varying measures across Australia. The nineties witnessed an increase in youth arts activity and a certain amount of validation within the arts industry of young people's arts and cultural practices. Young people and children are increasingly being acknowledged as artists and cultural contributors in their own right and will continue to change cultural form and content outside of the industry whether they are funded to do so or not. In some parts of the nation, youth arts has turned away from issue-based theatre that imitates traditional theatre forms to embrace multi-arts practice and incorporate non-art forms. However, few youth arts companies can properly resource let alone house the diverse arts and cultural interests of young people.

Theatre for children and young people became more sophisticated in the nineties. Some companies such as Arena and Zeal were willing to take risks and step outside of school curriculum driven objectives. Other parts of the TYP sector remained sanitised and issue-based. Rarely has Australian work matched the quality and innovation demonstrated by some of Denmark and Norway's companies. Some would argue that this is reflective of inadequate resourcing of TYP companies whilst others would argue that it is symptomatic of a lack of intellectual rigour in creating new work for our young. Arguably, some of the most interesting performance work for children and young people has occurred when the more progressive principles of youth arts have been incorporated into the process of creating the work.

An interesting trend in the last couple of years has been the focus placed by the industry upon young people as 'future audiences'. Society at large often positions children and young people as 'future

some things' rather than 'current some things'. It has been assumed that reduced ticket prices or free transport will grow theatre audiences, which denies adult oriented companies any responsibility for actually programming for or working with young people. The 'Australians and the Arts' Report (Australia Council, 2000) indicated that Australians would like to participate in rather than just observe the arts. This notion is particularly pertinent when discussing the role of children and young people in Australia's cultural landscape.

The issues that surround the TYP sector are extensive, and this paper does not purport to have covered them all. Rather the authors have elected to raise four provocations in order to provoke debate and discussion. The section entitled *Implications for Significant Practice* is meant to background the four provocations.

Provocation One

Exposure in the arts does not equate with understanding – companies need a philosophical understanding of why they are making work with and for young people that demonstrates an understanding of artmaking and aesthetic literacy.

'Exposure is not Education, Information is not Knowledge and Access is not Comprehension' (The National Art Education Association – USA).

'Learning in the arts can not only impact how young people learn to think, but also how they feel and behave.' Richard Riley, Secretary, Dept of Education USA (Fiske, 2000).

'The function of art is not to give the percipient [audience] any kind of pleasure, however noble, but to acquaint him (sic) with something he has not known before.' (Langer, 1953:19)

Implications for Significant Practice

In arts education terms, works of art need to engage young people aesthetically. By the term aesthetic we refer to the notion of young people's 'grounded aesthetic' or 'sensuous living processes' (Willis, 1990:21). Willis' aesthetic is inextricably linked with the dominant ideologies of young peoples' worlds, worlds where there is no longer a sense of a whole culture. He tells us that we can no longer assume that there is a 'shared, universal value system' and that young peoples' lives are now 'open, contested and unstable' (1990:12). To understand the 'grounded aesthetic' it is necessary to be aware that aesthetics is politically bound up with notions of sex and class and generationalism. The need to assist audiences, whether they are involved as participants or audience, to dig beneath the surface to facilitate deep connections with the arts experience is one of the crucial challenges for artmakers today. Audiences do not return to theatre when they have not connected with the work.

The relationship with the target audience prior to performance redefines the way in which audience development occurs by intrinsically linking the work with young peoples' aesthetics. The premises that surround working this way include:

- Artworkers who work with young people will benefit from a knowledge of the structure of aesthetic engagement in the artmaking process;
- Exposure to the arts does not necessarily equate with understanding the arts – works need to be scaffolded with resource materials such as Arena and Chunky Move's CD-ROMs and teaching videos;
- Knowing the codes and rules of artmaking will assist young audiences and artmakers to connect more deeply with works of art;
- Artists who work without awareness of the philosophical intent of their work merely reinforce the status quo – patriarchy and corporatism.

Example of philosophically grounded theatre practice:

'Theatre X does not commission artists to get into the "head space" of younger people – we commission interesting, often young artists to create the best work possible. We continually examine the development of our work by including representatives from our audience to feed into the work throughout its development. If Theatre X aims to produce new original work which examines the complexity of our world then we have an obligation to research our subject matter.'

Provocation Two

Re-conceptualising the relationship between artmakers, arts educators and young people as partners in creating learning cultures will assist arts practice.

'Pedagogically and politically, young people need to be given the opportunity to narrate themselves, to speak from the actual places where their experiences are shaped and mediated. This suggests more than letting kids have the opportunity to voice their concerns, it means providing the conditions – institutional, economic, spiritual, and cultural that allow them to reconceptualise themselves as citizens and develop a sense of what it means to fight for important social and political issues that affect their lives, bodies and society' (Giroux, 1998).

The central dilemma for theatre workers, critics, and policy-makers is how to speak of young people and these changing modes of performance at the end of the twentieth century: as 'the future upon which we are all dependent' (Take Over 97 Program 2); 'The substance of tomorrow's arts economy' (Swiftly Coot 12); 'theatre's lost generations' (Ward, Rev. of Features 12); or the 'new generation' creators of a 'new generation theatre' (STCSA, 'Magpie: Expressions of Interest', Hunter, 1999).

Implications for Significant Practice

There is a growing critique in arts education about the failure of many artists and teachers to develop the full capacities of young people by not going beyond their own socialisation. The purpose of instrumental (skills based) education is the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for work and taking part in society. Theatre can assist young people to navigate the contemporary post-modern world; a world of feelings not encountered in skills based education. The outcome of the instrumental model is that 'the most able students with the right background will be rewarded with positions commanding responsibilities, high salaries, and status' (Darvell, 1992:3) with those unable to cope feeling marginalised and 'socially excluded' (in Richer, 2000:3).

By promoting the value of lifelong learning that encompasses aesthetic literacy young people can learn to refine feelings. It is

through a growing awareness of the possibility of art, in this case theatre, that young people expand their aesthetic vocabulary, promoting 'more finely discriminated feelings' (Best, 1992:142). We are all navigators of the construct that comes after post-modernism. By staying aware of the impact of popular culture, consumerism and politics on the lives of young people, it is vital that youth workers, arts educators and artsworkers take an interest in youth research and cultural theory. Within an information society, the skills required for navigation need to be developed at an early age. The continued development of those skills is dependent upon the maintenance of a learning culture.

The word navigation is often used in arts and cultural contexts to describe the skills required to move through, and make meaning, of new forms and contents. In the early nineties, Australian social commentator Hugh Mackay described young people as 'the new pioneers'. He referred to them as the 'first navigators' – the first generation who were required to make sense of a multi-cultural, post-modern society. French social theorist Henri Giroux similarly referred to young people of the nineties as navigators. Giroux described them as victims of a landscape with shifting boundaries in a society where meaning is contingent. On the other hand, British cultural studies exponent Angela McRobbie argued that young people had already responded positively to post-modernism, demonstrating their resourcefulness through the invention and development of new cultural forms.

In effectively meeting the cultural and artistic needs of young people living in contemporary western society, the following principles are vital:

- Strategic partnerships for efficacious lifelong learning/arts practice – companies need to work with arts education specialists, target audiences, schools, teachers, young people and children.
- Arts practice needs to relate to young peoples'/children's' social, spiritual, civic and economic discourses.
- Non-positioning young people and children as audiences of the future – they have the ability to contribute and current culture makers.
- Lifelong learning in the globalised world needs arts companies working with young people to create works that are:
 - Complex
 - Unpredictable
 - Networked based
 - Capable of changing rapidly, demonstrating innovative approaches
 - Horizontally integrated with evidence that companies can facilitate partnerships and alliances
 - Open

– Information Rich – scaffolded resources supporting the art (Bentley, 2000:17).

Provocation Three

Arts Funding for TYP/Children's Theatre needs to be about quality, fairness and wise public spending.

'Our children have ironically, already made their move. They are leading us in our revolution past linear thinking, duality, mechanism, hierarchy, metaphor, and God himself towards a dynamic, holistic, animistic, weightless, and recapitulated culture. Chaos is their natural environment' (Rushkoff, 1996:269).

'Over the past few decades, young people have challenged some of the dominant values that previously determined what is good and what is bad art' (Richer, 2000:3).

Financial Year of 99/00

Total Spent on Youth Theatre: \$822,776

Total Spent on TYP: \$1,324,596

Financial Year 89/90

Total spent on Youth Theatre: \$590,8875

Total spent on TYP: \$ 1,992,063 (Australia Council, Theatre Fund).

Implications for Significant Practice

Accessing funds to create new work for young people operates in the same highly competitive market as those seeking to create adult theatre. There is never enough money to fund all applicants. The sentiment that young people will learn best about the human condition by always being taken to see 'broadly chosen well-produced adult theatre' (Galloway, P, The Courier-Mail, Saturday, 1999: May 29) is one that the Australia Council fundamentally disagrees with. However, gaining access through the assessment criteria of the Theatre Fund means that companies with a proven track record (by adult criteria) are often re-funded without demonstrating quality by young peoples' criteria. Of course, this is not to deny that young people should connect with the theatrical canon and attend theatre made by adults. However, to deny young people the opportunity to create and hear their own stories is to look backwards. Sadly, sufficiently well funded work commissioned particularly for young people from 3–25 grounded in their aesthetic/interests rarely occurs. Much of the work commissioned and created in Australia is:

- often old fashioned and formulaic
- lacking in rigour and an understanding of young peoples'/children's' 'grounded aesthetic'
- isolated – TYP and Children's Theatre is a bubble within the industry
- lacking in research into why the arts are important for children and young people

• not aware of the need to distinguish between the two distinct sectors – Young People and Children’s Theatre

Artworkers need to look at projects such as the ABC’s ‘Race Around the World’ and the contemporary music festivals – e.g. LIVID, Big Day Out – which proved popular because they encourage young people to take up public space and ‘do it themselves’. Such projects recognise the diverse backgrounds, tastes and interests of young people, positioning them as capable and resilient cultural consumers and creators. Rather than ‘dumbing down’ information, they create a shared language – a sense of being ‘in the know’ or ‘in the club’. They attract attention on the back of home grown young talent and raise awareness of the creative, financial and cultural worth of young people’s ideas and interests. These examples of major youth cultural events promote the notion that arts and cultural resources in the hands of the young can result in significant industry and economic growth.

Provocation Four

Future theatre/performance practice is multi arts + technology + non performative artists.

‘Passage into the 21st century is more than just another bit of convenient millennial drama. The world is in the midst of a very real shift from a predominantly industrial to an information society. Technology is providing increasingly sophisticated tools for communications, and tomorrow’s workers will need to know how to manage them in a world of multimedia events’ (ArtsEdNet, 1999, ‘Arts Education for a Changing World’, www.artsednet.getty.edu).

Implications for Significant Practice

Arena Theatre Company represents a company making work for young people who have developed a sophisticated approach to working with multimedia technology and non-performing artists. Artistic Director Rosemary Myers states:

‘Arena celebrates a post-modern reshaping of our cultural expression by creating performances where the meaning is contained in the interplay between the texts, form and content. Technology has educated a generation in film, rapid editing, sound and symbolic comprehension. Film, music, and video clips have lifted the expectations of the “younger” audience. A modern audience, whether two or twenty, is equipped with the fluid tools gained from intense exposure to image and information saturation, to read across mediums and to holistically view a much broader range of integrated forms. We believe it is vital to collaborate with artists from non-performative backgrounds so we may develop new practice which allows these forms to speak together... Arena aims to compete with other forms of

successful entertainment so we must aspire to present works which are of an equivalent calibre and demonstrative of the respect for the intelligence of our audience. In order to achieve this we must consistently ask: What is the new role of theatre? We must accept that film has transformed the way in which performance is compared and judged and recognise the sophistication of the viewing public. We must also recognise that theatre has the capacity to provide a dynamic and confronting experience like no other. It’s crucial to us that our work is highly accessible, captivating and celebrating the imaginations of our audience’ (Myers, 1998).

The emergence of pastiche and eclecticism as ruling factors in artforms that are most accessible to young people – e.g. fashion, music, film – indicate that rigid naturalism and realism/magic realism that often occurs in TYP/Children’s Theatre needs to be redressed. This may involve working with non-performative artists with highly developed technological skills. This will facilitate moving beyond token screen and music sampling within theatre for young people and embracing the principles that make fashion, music and film so attractive to young people:

- Interactivity
- Ability to do-it-yourself – to recreate or transform elsewhere
- Reflective of valued symbols and signs
- Recognising that young people themselves developed the form – a non-patronising approach – no misappropriation
- Ability to cater for diversity – subculture is dead – young people move in and out of a range of micro-cultures

In conclusion these four provocations should facilitate strategic discussion assisting the Theatre Fund to develop policy directions for Theatre for Children and Young People in Australia for the 21st century. In a theatre landscape labelled ‘empty, stale and flat’ (Wherrett, Sydney Moring Herald 20th January), perhaps TYP can be a focus for ‘dynamic, engaging and innovative’ (Evans, 29th January 2001) performance practice.

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