1986-1987: Style vs. Substance

In his departing editorial, Ian Chance refers to the marketing and subscriptions goals of the magazine – presumably set by the Youth Performing Arts Advisory Committee of Carclew. One suspects that, for him, there is a belief that the magazine would always have a niche market with a small subscription base, as its survival was dependent on supplying the decision makers and stakeholders in youth arts with high quality content that would help them in their work. And, although the decisions of those groups would affect millions of young people each year, they probably numbered less than a thousand people as potential subscribers. The next few issues would reveal efforts for *Lowdown* to broaden its appeal.

Perhaps it was for this reason that Carclew made an unusual choice for its next *Lowdown* Editor. Considering the upcoming ASSITEJ Congress in 1987 and the critical role the magazine would play in this international forum during that time, it could be expected that the Editor would be highly experienced in youth arts – someone of the standing of Andrew Bleby, Helen Rickards or Chance himself. Instead, the current designer of the magazine, Jo Shearer, was made Editor.

Coming from a visual art and design background, Shearer set about lightening the tone of the magazine and making it bright, breezy and visually appealing. There appeared to be an increase in funding with the departure of Chance, as both staffing and the size of the magazine increased. Rather than 40 pages, each issue was often over 70 pages, and packed with reviews and State news pages filled with snippets of information and pictures. Often there was a photo section at the front, and short interviews with influential practitioners in a new ‘Artspeople’ section. With strong visual appeal, *Lowdown* certainly had a more contemporary style. Content, however, was another matter.

Shearer felt that, as ‘Australian youth theatre companies are some of the most mobile people on earth…they’re forever sitting in airport lounges or traffic jams…and need something light to read’¹. As Shearer’s own writing style was bright and breezy to the point of being incomprehensible², and with lots of in-jokes, there was now a Features Editor, John Emery. Shearer set her new Features Editor with the task of ‘sniffing out scandals and stories’³. At times this merely meant Emery giving a racy title to an otherwise normal *Lowdown* story, but not always.

Emery also wrote for Adelaide Review and Australian Penthouse, penned the travel novel *The Sky People* and was going through a gonzo journalism phase, obviously inspired by the writing of Hunter S. Thompson. For Emery, sometimes the best topic for an article was the writer, accompanied by descriptions of his emotional state and cynical observations of the world around him. In long, rambling articles like *Desperately Seeking Santamaria*⁴, the coverage of youth arts was an occasional aside in Emery’s travel monologues, replete with superficial stereotyping of different cultures⁵ and places⁶.
Desperately Seeking Santamaria, on theatre in the ACT, was proudly published by Jo Shearer as a 'story of fear, loathing, and dark undercurrents in the nation’s capital'\textsuperscript{vii}. It included such deathly phrases as, ‘Well, it was obvious to this good old boy that a story was afoot’, and took up six pages of the magazine. (Emery managed to write another eleven pages of features for this issue, making seventeen pages in all.) For Lowdown’s ACT youth arts practitioners, his writing was utterly opposed to their expectations of the magazine and appeared a calculated insult by the Editor. The letters poured in and this time hit their mark with devastating effect:

‘Desperately Seeking Santamaria is indeed a loathsome story... It substitutes effect for content, impression for thought and insult for comment... Most disturbing of all [is that] Emery’s work is fully supported by an editorial policy that seems to be declaring itself for controversy, no matter how tritely based. Who does this serve? Certainly not the professional body which has previously subscribed to Lowdown... Where are you Lowdown?\textsuperscript{viii}

Indeed, where was Lowdown? The publication that youth arts professionals had taken to their hearts seemed to have been hijacked by a team that at times regarded them with cynical amusement.

Despite the new editorial policy, Lowdown continued to thrive. Its traditional functions continued to be served in the State columns and contributions by State Editors such as Michael Forde (Qld), Amanda Field (ACT), Dianna Rees (NT), David Gerrand (Tas), Richard Sallis (Vic) and Priscilla Shorne (NSW). There were fine contributions by respected practitioners such as Mary Travers, responsible for Young People’s Theatre and Puppetry at the Theatre Board of the Australia Council, and Barbara Manning, founder of Salamanca Theatre Company in Hobart.

The former editor, Ian Chance, continued to make contributions throughout Shearer’s editorship, adding a less flippant tone and more depth to coverage. Thanks to these contributors, Lowdown managed a comprehensive 86-page issue focusing on the 1987 ASSITEJ World Congress in Adelaide.
1987: The ASSITEJ World Congress

In Australian youth performing arts, the 9th ASSITEJ World Congress & General Assembly in Adelaide marks the beginning of a new era and the end of an old one. In previous generations, inspiration and new ideas tended to be sought in Europe and, particularly, the UK. After the Congress, Australian youth arts practitioners looked more to Asia and the Pacific. Where before there was a tendency to accord respect according to the reputation of a practitioner or company, afterwards there was a more postmodern outlook, whereby art was judged more on its merit and context – no matter how famous the artist. After the Congress there was a far greater confidence too in the practice that occurred in Australia, and a sense that Australian cultural product had to continue to be innovative to reflect a constantly changing world.

The Congress, of course, did not make all of these things occur – these developments occurred over time and, as with any changing of eras, there were exceptions and alternate narratives. But it was a powerful catalysing event. It must be remembered that most of the influential youth performing arts practitioners of Australia attended the Congress and Festival, participated in the same discussions, took part in the same arguments and had the same experiences. If they didn’t all come to the same conclusions, they did show a solidarity and pride when dealing with some very opinionated visitors from ASSITEJ centres around the world.

The international program of the Come Out 87 festival included *Wandering Stars* by Korea’s Dong Rang Theatre for Young People, directed by Kim Woo Ok, and Honolulu Theatre for Youth with *Song for the Navigator*, a celebration of Micronesian culture. In the Australian program, Angela Chaplin’s acclaimed Arena Theatre production of *The Women There* looked at the neglected role of women in shaping early Australian history. Magpie Theatre reprised two classic David Holman plays, *Small Poppies* and *No Worries*. Patch Theatre, with *My Place*, tackled a story of homelessness for a young audience, Victoria’s Four’s Company presented the relationships of three young school friends in *JG, Specs and Angie* and Handspan Theatre’s *A Change of Face* explored multicultural friction amongst young Australians. Dance was featured in a combined program of Dance North, Rhythm Theatre, Dance Works, Feats Unlimited and Tasmanian Dance Company, and Leigh Warren and Carclew’s John Salisbury created a youth dance production, *Taking Flight*, with four high schools.

For international ASSITEJ delegates the strong youth program was to prove controversial. Opening with the youth opera *Frankie*, there were a range of performances by youth, including Riverland Youth Theatre, Multicultural Youth Theatre, Urrbrae High School, Unley Youth Theatre and Marion High School. Some well-known children’s writers – such as Margaret Mahy, Elizabeth Mansutti and Mem Fox – took part in the Allwrite! program, there was a design conference, James Morrison and Peter Combe were just part of the music program and Community Come Out ensured the festival pushed into even remote areas of South Australia.

To visitors, it seemed inconceivable that a youth arts festival could have such a prominent place in the life of not only a city like Adelaide, but a State that was one and a half times the size of Texas. As Ian Chance pointed out, ‘in the lower depths of the Festival Centre, serious huddles of experts engrossed in the theory of youth culture were all but swamped in the vital reality of youthful practice’.*ix* Much to the surprise of many Australian delegates there were strong protests from delegates...
from the Eastern Bloc, France and the US about the involvement of young people as anything but passive audience members. Maurice Yendt, from France, asserted forcefully that the statutes of ASSITEJ ‘clearly state’ that it was concerned with theatre by professional adult performers and sought to limit all discussion to only these productions. There was a mass walkout in Riverland Youth Theatre’s Flood Play by ASSITEJ delegates (though by all accounts the rest of the audience may have wanted to do the same). Australians were bemused by a statement by one European delegate rejecting consultation with young people with the analogy, ‘When discussing aircraft design we do not need to talk with the passengers’, and amused by one American’s statement, ‘Australia! The place where the actors are in the classrooms and the kids are on stage’.

To some international delegates, the involvement of young people in performance threatened the very professionalism they had fought so hard to achieve. These views were felt so strongly that even when Pacific Island representatives explained that performance by young people was a part of their culture and other cultures around the world (such as in Africa) that ASSITEJ wanted to expand to, they were met with replies such as ‘We do not want to change European customs to suit others’

Soon discussions amongst Australian delegates started to revolve about what would later be recognised as postmodern and postcolonial ideas, such as youth arts within the context of different cultures and the impossibility of imposing universal ideas of excellence or aesthetics across the board.

The culture shock went both ways. For ASSITEJ delegates coming from more hierarchical societies it was disconcerting to encounter even non-theatre people, such as Australian drama teachers, ‘willing to debate the theory and practice of young people’s theatre on equal terms with anyone – oblivious or unconcerned by their companies’ status as major directors, producers and writers in Europe or America’.

In a special edition of Theatre, Childhood and Youth published for the Congress, Richard Tulloch put forward Australia’s lack of tradition and isolation as a strength in Australian youth performing arts practice and, perhaps, a reason for the confidence and optimism in Australia at the time:

‘David Williamson, Australia’s most successful playwright and screenwriter, once told me that his greatest advantage as a writer was that he didn’t understand much about writing. Not being inhibited by agonising whether he was getting it right or not, he was able to get on with the job, finding his own ways of doing things as he went along. Australia’s young people’s theatre has developed in much the same way.’

Tulloch goes on to explain the practical nature of youth arts in Australia, and how it accepted influences like TIE, only to adapt these influences for the Australian context. Not having the resources of Japanese, American and European companies to mount large-scale productions in large theatres, he places the touring model of theatre in schools in its economic context. He also points to changes since 1985 in the standard touring model and experimentations in new areas of work, but feels that companies are producing too many shows to service their market, and looks to a future when more time and resources can be spent on developing productions that can be kept in repertoire.

John Emery picked up the postcolonial undercurrent and stretched a comparison to its limit in ‘The Yin and Yang of Gunboat Diplomacy: The politics of the ASSITEJ
vote in Adelaide'. With a map of military bases in the Asia/Pacific region, his 
Lowdown article linked the vote for the Executive Committee in the General 
Assembly to a history of military interference and colonialism in the Pacific. He was 
responding to events in the ASSITEJ General Assembly where, with the help of a 
raft of proxy votes, European ASSITEJ centres voted down Vietnam and the 
hardworking Japan centre, and barely gave Australia enough votes to retain its seat. 
Emery did sum up the feeling of many Australian delegates though, with: 
‘...the defeat of Asia and the Pacific at the ASSITEJ Congress vote is the best thing 
that could have happened to us. Because that defeat has defined for us who we are 
and what we are doing.'

At the end of the Congress, designer Trina Parker, from Victoria, echoed the feelings 
of many Australian delegates. 'I’ve worked in this area for 12 years and for the first 
time in my life I feel as though Australia was much more aligned with the Pacific Rim 
rather than Europe. I feel the growth of a movement that’s really got something to 
say.'

The Director of the Congress, Michael FitzGerald, gained wide respect in Australia 
and internationally for his strong advocacy of Australian and Pacific youth arts 
practice during the Congress and Festival, as well as his support for the inclusion of 
performance by young people as part of the ASSITEJ Australia brief. More than 
holding his own in the robust debates, he was noted as a future leader by ASSITEJ 
centres disillusioned with the ‘organisation being treated as a private European 
club’, as UK participant Paul Harman put it. As proceedings ended, he announced 
future plans for engagement with Canada, China, Vietnam, Thailand, New Zealand 
and, hopefully, India.

Australia’s position was clear – it was looking away from Europe and towards Asia 
and the Pacific.
1987-1989: A new maturity

The Congress had not only given Australian theatre makers new ideas, it also sharpened *Lowdown’s* focus too. With a new Pacific focus, the magazine embarked on a one-year partnership with The Canadian Institute of the Arts for Young Audiences, which distributed *Lowdown* in Canada. With John Emery on the ground for the Vancouver Children’s Festival, there were twelve pages of features on Canada in the August 1987 edition. And while his feature ‘Hatred and Envy in Vanier Park’ (a central location of the Vancouver Children’s Festival) had another Hunter S. Thompson title and the format of diary entries from a harried writer, Emery’s observations were more insightful and to the point than in the past. On the home front, Mark St. Leon from the Australia Council contributed an excellent overview of the youth circus movement in Australia, with details of more than 20 groups in six States and the ACT.

Queensland also started to stamp its mark on the magazine around this time. Judy Pippen’s review of La Boite Theatre’s *The Great Circle* in the October issue made it clear that youth theatre there was beginning to create art on the cutting edge. Emery travelled to Brisbane in 1988 to cover the first Queensland Youth Arts Festival, coordinated by Michael and Ludmila Doneman of La Boite Theatre.

In the major eleven page feature ‘At the Frontier: John Emery in Queensland’, Emery managed to not only profile some of the extraordinary energy and activity in Queensland youth arts during the Expo 88 year, but also bring to the surface friction and discontent within that community. In 1986 John O’Toole wrote in *Lowdown* of the crippling ‘Moralysis’ that was affecting Queensland schools performances, where conservative censorship ruled and arts and education funding was ‘at the direct whim of a patriarchy’. Emery found that while some things had progressed at an extraordinary pace, some things had stayed the same.

The list of interview subjects for this article was impressive: Mike Ahern, Premier and Minister for the Arts; Dona Greaves, Director, Arts Division, Queensland Government; Arthur Frame, Education Program Director, Queensland Arts Council; Sean Mee, Director, TN2! Theatre Company; Fiona Winning, Street Arts Collective spokesperson; Michael Forde, Artistic Director, Kite Theatre; Jim Vile, Artistic Director, La Boite Theatre; Michael Doneman, also of La Boite; Dr Cathy Brown, Queensland Performing Arts Centre; Christine Campbell, Roadwork TIE; and Mark Radvan, Co-ordinator, Theatre Arts Program, Kelvin Grove CAE, to name just a few.

The article is a fascinating document of Queensland youth arts at a key time in its history. With a generous sense of camaraderie, some of the country’s best contemporary artists and an exciting performance tradition beginning to emerge, Queensland youth arts practitioners still battled against a cautious and paternal touring network monopolised by the Queensland Arts Council, an arts funding infrastructure in its infancy and some baffling decisions at Ministerial level.

With many changes of staffing around the country at this time, one in particular must be mentioned. By 1988 Roger Chapman had been Director of Carclew for seven years, and announced his decision to stand down. The National Theatre, in the UK, headhunted him for a position of director of national and international touring and he returned to England, where he was to be associated with some of the legendary European theatrical productions of the coming decades. During his time at Carclew, funding for independent young people’s theatre companies in South Australia had
risen from $23,000 to $560,000, he had played a major role in the continued growth of the Come Out Festival, there was a new theatre venue (the Odeon) dedicated to young people, a Carclew radio production studio, Carclew music and dance programs and annual Youth Theatre Camps\textsuperscript{xxi}. Without his support, there would quite likely have been no ASSITEJ congress, no Lowdown magazine after 1983, and no YPAA to re-emerge from Carclew in the guise of ASSITEJ Australia. According to Michael FitzGerald:

‘...he was the driving force behind all this...He pursued these ends at Board, State and Federal level. He ensured and supported the appointment of officers to implement this. He understood the place of controversy and the need for change provided they were well founded and delivered with style and flair. He was a great one for these attributes as indeed he was himself an example.’ \textsuperscript{xxii}

By 1988 and 1989, Australian youth performing arts, and Lowdown’s coverage of it, was a world away from the beginning of the decade. The sector had found a mature inclusive identity and welcomed a wide range of groups as part of its core community. Lowdown’s brief included major regional focus issues, such as the Northern Territory issue (Vol. 11.2), multicultural arts, Indigenous arts, interdisciplinary contemporary performance and arts for people with a disability or deafness.

Internationally, Australia was confident on the world stage, and highly aware of international developments. Michael FitzGerald, in his regular ASSITEJ update columns, updated Australian practitioners of world news events and key gatherings that they may wish to attend. The ASSITEJ Australia office offered a service whereby Australians could contact it before travelling overseas for key contacts and introductions in the countries they visited.

In-depth coverage of Asian events such as the Asian Theatre for Children and Young People Symposium, held in Japan in October 1989, informed Lowdown readers of the people, organisations, current concerns and artistic successes of their Asian counterparts. Since the 1970s, tours of a wide range of Asian performing artforms had been popular in Australia, as well as Japanese arthouse films and even Japanese children’s television (for instance, every boy in Australia wanted to be the samurai Shintaro in the 1960s – or a ninja). ASSITEJ Australia/YPAA would develop this interest into a deeper engagement in the coming decade, forging the strongest of bonds and exciting collaborations with ASSITEJ colleagues in Japan and Korea in particular.

Meanwhile, Australian youth theatre practice had grown in leaps and bounds. Now Europeans like Klaus Maier, Artistic Director of Theater von Menschen fur Menschen in Nuremburg, would travel to Australia for inspiration:

‘It has been said a hundred times, that Youth Theatre in Australia is unique and remarkable; so I don’t want to repeat it. For myself, coming from Western Germany, the experiences with this form of theatre in Australia have been a real glimpse into the future.’ \textsuperscript{xxii}

Ian Chance’s national review of youth theatre practice in late 1988 provided a host of snapshots of youth theatre practice. Practitioners detailed their work at companies like: La Boite and Central Queensland Youth Theatre (Qld); Gove Junior Theatre in Nhulunbuy, Arnhem Land (NT); Canberra Youth Theatre (ACT); Shopfront, PACT, Powerhouse, Elanora, ATYP and Newcastle’s 2 Til 5 Youth Theatres (NSW); St
Martins Youth Theatre (Vic); Youth Theatre 2000, Burnie (Tas); Unley Youth Theatre, Cirkidz and Port Adelaide Youth Theatre (SA); and Youth Theatre Co at Subiaco Theatre Centre (WA). He painted a vivid picture of the current scene:

‘More and more we find first generation youth theatre members, having completed advanced theatre training, returning to the fold to nurture the next generation. And we find highly skilled theatre workers, disillusioned with foyer culture and craving a cutting edge, prepared to dedicate their craft at discount to the fresh enthusiasms and outspoken creativity of young people.

‘For youth theatre is a movement at whose nexus is the development of confident socialisation and an independent voice in all its participants. This comes about as the natural outcome of a style which focuses on the “process” of developing dramatic communication skills rather than the “product” of staging them. Through their growing awareness young people soon realise their power within this process and are quick to demand a say in it – and such demands cannot be denied without negating the entire experience.’

The situation for TIE was radically different. The earlier didacticism of the 1970s and early 1980s seemed inappropriate for young people used to expressing their own opinions and learning through discussions and interaction. Moreover, the touring TIE model was starting to become a standing joke – the lame performances of the ‘Whizz Bang Theatre Company’ in sketches on the popular TV show Fast Forward, in front of bored students, had more than a few TIE practitioners looking sheepish. Once the dominant force at the beginning of the decade, now it was dying off, or morphing into Theatre in Schools or Theatre for Young People. Directors like Rod Wilson, at Jigsaw Theatre Company in the ACT, were comfortable in predicting (accurately, as it turned out) that, ‘by the 1990s, TIE as we know it will be dying out’.

Steven Gration, formerly of Magpie TIE in SA and currently Artistic Director of Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre in NT, questioned the soap opera naturalism that had become the norm in many TIE productions, and pointed out that ‘TIE can look to Youth Theatre to find the spirit and forms it should be exploring’. At the national YAPA (Youth and Performing Arts) Conference at Carclew in April 1989, Gratian championed a viewpoint that many others shared, where art was not in service to any other goal:

‘Theatre can no longer be an instrument for learning about a particular idea or issue, it must explore forms that offer avenues for the imagination, introduce new audiences to theatre and win back the traditional base of support in schools…’

Meanwhile, Lowdown was having its own problems with survival. The question was the same as AYPAA faced in the late 1970s – Australians wanted national projects like Lowdown and YPAA, they just didn’t want to pay for them. By 1988 the South Australian Youth Arts Board (SAYAB) was paying 70% of the magazine’s costs and had had enough. Considering the lack of willingness of other States to contribute, and the freeze on Australia Council funds, a decision was made to shut the magazine down in September 1989. A massive groundswell of national support saved the magazine, with the Australia Council contributing an extra $50,000 and other contributions from various State and Territory governments.

The last Lowdown of the decade began with a warning from the Chairman of SAYAB, Maurice O’Brien, reminding readers that it was only a temporary reprieve. He acknowledged that ‘the recent avalanche of letters of support from Box Hill to
Biloela, from Perth to Brisbane and beyond, confirmed our belief that *Lowdown* met a vital need among arts practitioners across Australia\textsuperscript{xxviii}. However, that wasn't the issue. The high unit cost of the magazine and low subscription base meant that, if it was to continue, support (including subscriptions) from outside SA would have to be far greater than in the past.

It was to be Jo Shearer's last issue as Editor. The 1990s would begin with some substantial challenges for the magazine.

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\textsuperscript{ii} ‘So we had no choice but to continue delivering the goods, milk cans, chooks, an occasional paying passenger, on Australian National Railways, supplementing our performing arts pittance with hard, but honest toil (always the worst kind).’ In this editorial Shearer appears to be on a train with arts identities. She seems to assume we know why, and what she is doing, so it is never explained. Jo Shearer, ‘From the Editors’, *Lowdown* V. 9.6, p5. Adelaide: Carclew, 1987.


\textsuperscript{vi} ‘Childers Street Theatre was even more run down than Gorman House. I dimly remembered a university dance I crashed there once, when coke was something you drank...’ John Emery, ‘Desperately Seeking Santamaria’, *Lowdown* V. 9.1, p6. Adelaide: Carclew, 1987.


\textsuperscript{xxii} Email from Michael FitzGerald to Tony Mack, 28 June 2012.


