

# LOWDOWN

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# Critical Quality

Come Out 95, with the support of Foundation SA, is to host an Australian first - an international symposium for critics of theatre for young people.



'Shamran' by Baggard Teatret

The steering committee believes the event will have effects that will last well beyond the two day symposium. It will raise the profile of criticism of theatre for young people, through airing and debating some of the Big Questions. What purposes are served by criticism? Do you apply

the same standards to reviewing young people's theatre as to mainstream theatre? What are the attitudes of editors and owners of newspapers to this branch of criticism? It is hoped that a healthier and more informed arena for the general discussion and criticism of all forms of theatre for

young people will result from the Come Out symposium.

As a curtain raiser to the symposium, a member of the steering committee, Rosemary Luke, revisits a stimulating critical discussion which took place during the 1994 Okinawa Festival of Theatre for Young Audiences.

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**Michael Ramløse and Carsten Jensen (journalist and theatre critic)**

Conversation among international delegates to the Festival frequently centred on the uniformly high quality of the Danish offerings. They ranged from one-person shows to Baggård Teatret's 'Shamran', an ambitious dramatisation of a modern Danish epic novel for children, with strong ties to the traditions of Scandinavian mythology and legend.

Such was the interest that a group of Danish delegates offered to present a seminar about an aspect of Danish theatre criticism. It is also part of the Danish theatre peer review system and fits within the cycle that commerce and industry refer to as quality assurance.

The seminar was led by Michael Ramløse, writer, director, linguist and current Secretary-General of ASSITEJ International, and Anette Eggert, Artistic Director of Baggård Teatret.

Anette Eggert provided a brief background to theatre for young people (TYP) in Denmark by explaining that Denmark, with a population of merely 5 million has 100 professional TYP companies, of which only 50 receive government funding. Yet they all survive and they all make good work. (Baggård Teatret, with an ensemble of 12, is one of the largest.)

The current style of TYP began 25 years ago in revolt against the existing large stage style of children's theatre. Twenty years ago the companies formed an

association of TYP companies with one of its prime aims being the improvement of the quality of work produced for young audiences.

Each Spring, in a different Danish town, a large festival is held. One of the functions of the festival is to enable companies to see and criticise one another's work. Companies began to work in pairs on this critical, evaluative exercise in the early 1980s. After a couple of years the lack of a common critical language and approach became apparent and the process described below was developed under the umbrella of the Children's Theatres' Association.

A "critical group" consisting of two actors, a designer and a director was established to undertake the review. Participating in the process is entirely voluntary for each company. The understanding is that the criticism should be both honest and constructive; practical rather than academic. The critical group is merely giving advice and making suggestions for improvement.

They see the performance twice, read the script, discuss their impressions for 6-8 hours, then meet with the company for 3-4 hours in a session which may even involve both groups working on the floor on problematic or disputed scenes or interpretations. The critical group, or "quality committee" as it is sometimes half-jokingly known, works closely with the

training committee of the Association in order to offer to specific companies training and professional development opportunities in the areas most needed.

The process covers seven main areas. Some of the questions raised are outlined below.

### *1 The "artistic will" or objectives*

Why has the company chosen to present this story/idea/theme dramatically? Does it engage the audience? Is this play, in this form and style, the right play for this company at this time?

### *2 The dramatic line or script*

This involves looking critically at the work of the author or devisers, or at the dramatic development of a work with few words. Is it well-prepared and well-written in a literary sense? Are the characters credible? Does the script consider the audience's age and level? Does the text have an integrity and an internal consistency, or is it just a mouthpiece for the author's views on a or b? What is the relationship between the text and other dramatic attributes; ie, are there enough or too many words?

### *3 Critical choices - or decisions and solutions*

This covers style, direction, design, music, technical aspects and how they all work together to create the whole. Has the director made the necessary technical decisions and have they been thought through carefully and logically? Are they defensible? How does the performance work in its entirety?

### *4 The work of the actors*

The critical group looks at the actors' technical skills, character work, credibility, ability to demonstrate more than one dimension, the relationship between the characters and the audience, their relationship to the audience, their flexibility and responsiveness.

### *5 The company's relationship to its audience*

Does the company respect and respond to the audience? Do

children feel comfortable and secure in this theatre experience? Do they have a sense that it is important to the company to be playing to them today (even if for the company this is performance number 137)?

#### *6 Relationship with the objectives of the company*

To what extent have the company's objectives been achieved in this play and this performance? Has the company aimed and worked appropriately within its limitations in making this piece of work? Are the company's ambitions too high or too low in relation to what they can achieve artistically at this point?

#### *7 Ethics - or integrity*

What is the theme, the philosophy, what the Greeks called the  $\text{ιδέα}$ , behind this piece? Do all the artistic choices reflect this  $\text{ιδέα}$ ? Is the company's attitude and behaviour to their audience in line with the intentions of the performance?

In the Okinawa seminar Ramløse and Eggert then replayed his role as a member of the "critical group" which reviewed *Shamran*, a major production for Baggård. The exchange was intelligent, probing, respectful, sensitive and forceful. It ranged from a discussion, both theoretical and practical, of the difficulties inherent in transposing an epic narrative into dramatic form. An outcome of this was an acknowledgment by the company that some external dramaturgy would have been beneficial to the process - an understanding which may be used to inform and improve later works.

Michael Ramløse would not allow the director to get away with saying "I am pleased that you are puzzled by that" (in this case the androgynous representation of the character Death). In the Danish process, such an enigma (or lack of artistic clarity?) is picked up and questioned, and a resolution is sought - for the sake of the young audience, not just for academic debate.

Few of the questions raised in the sections above will appear new or ground-breaking to Australian

theatre workers. What is innovative and, in my view, worthy of imitation is the organised and consistent operation of a searching peer review system which is artist-generated, voluntary, and independent of funding issues. If the work seen in Okinawa is indicative of the general quality of Danish theatre for young people (and visitors to Denmark and other international festivals assert that it is) then it is a process which deserves close examination by Australian companies.

To the steering committee of the critics symposium it also suggests a framework which might usefully guide review and criticism of work produced for young people. The thoughtful observation, research and reflection which are implicit in the seven steps would surely make for stronger, more constructive and yes, more *critical* criticism of theatre for young people.

A postscript: This informative and entertaining session was one of my personal highlights at the

Okinawa Festival. It attracted a small but mixed audience of directors, teachers, actors and academics - most of them Japanese. I have a keen interest in language and linguistics and it was fascinating to be part of a discussion which was led by Danes, in flawless English, then translated into Japanese by informal interpreters, including a young Tokyo university student, with the process reversed for comments and questions. When participants struggled with a technical term in English, the group deferred to the English speakers in the group - an Australian and an American from Hawaii who'd spent most of her life in South Africa and Israel. True internationalism in action!

#### **Rosemary Luke**

*Rosemary Luke is Chair of the Board of Management of Unley Youth Theatre and works at the University of South Australia. She thanks Michael Ramløse for his assistance with this article.*

### **Backstares Theatre Inc.**

## ***DOWN SOUTH***

**writing & direction -- Martin Christmas**

**design--Jenny Tarran**

**soundscapes--John Wilson**

**epic tribal dance drama--a youth anthem**

**Come Out production**

**touring 27th Mar-8th Apr--12 yrs and upwards**

**1st Site Lion Arts Centre Mon 27th Mar**

**6.30pm--Tickets \$8--08 267 5122**

**Noarlunga, Victor Harbor, Clare Valley,  
southern schools (by request)**

***the Rebellion is under way!***

**enq: Backstares--08 384 6744**