

LOWDOWN

Youth Performing Arts in Australia

August 1991 Volume 13 Number 4

\$4.80



university theatre reviewed

form *and* function

percolating ideology in youth theatre

No-one really believes in art for art's sake anymore, do they? In the first of a series of opinion pieces, **Francis Greenslade** tackles the meshing of politics, ideology and art in the Australian youth arts industry.

The Ideological Delirium Youth Theatre Company is presenting its production of *Koalas Are Lovely*, written by the artistic director, funded by the Department of Wildlife and with a cast of enthusiastic youth performers with teaspoons taped to their noses. The show sets out, for 45 minutes, to explain the loveliness of koalas and the unloveliness of a world devoid of them.

To be fair, some of its audience leave the theatre full of wonder at just how lovely koalas can be, but many (some of whom already thought koalas were quite lovely anyway) feel resentful at being told what to think about koalas, and bored by three quarters of an hour of the protagonists' continual delight at the sheer ...well, loveliness of the particular marsupial in question.

"Youth theatre seems to be subject, more than most other performing art forms, to 'Moralisis'", (John O'Toole, *Lowdown*, November 1986) a disease in which the "arts" of youth

arts (i.e. *for* youth and *by* youth) is often secondary to political "soundness". This message-on-a-plate theatre can often both turn off an audience by talking down to them and over-emphasise content at the expense of form, making the theatrical experience little more than a moved social studies lesson.

No criticism, either of youth theatre or political theatre, is intended. Like the personal, all theatre is political, even a production by the One Too Twee Theatre Company of *The Naughty Princess Who Wouldn't Eat Her Crusts*. It is only those cases in which political agenda becomes the *raison d'être* of a theatre company that are at issue.

Moreover, youth theatre practitioners often make assumptions, usually unconsciously, about what their audiences *ought* to be shown. These aren't always valid.

The concept of theatre as a "well-wrought urn", a piece of art that stands proudly behind a proscenium arch,

has been under attack over past years. In its place have come concepts of theatre as having a responsibility to society, of service to the community, of cultural democracy, access, participation and empowerment, all of which have transformed much of the youth theatre that we now see into a completely different animal. Various factors are responsible for this.

Funding

Youth theatre companies can't generate large box office revenue to the same extent that "adult" theatre companies can. As a result, much depends on funding and theatre companies are often forced to do projects in line with funding availability. Unley Youth Theatre's *Sports Briefs* was created in order to get money from Foundation South Australia, a funding body that takes up the slack from the banning of tobacco sponsorship. It is also a body committed to promoting health messages through sport, arts and

education. Whilst I offer no criticism of the production - it was very well created, performed and received - it is just an indication of how exigencies of funding determine the content of programmes and how economic forces are changing the theatre we see.

Susan Ditter of Port Youth Theatre calls it "choosing a menu from what's in the fridge." However, in the current economic climate that's all theatre companies can do. It is a problem when the only things in the fridge are some cruddy week-old pizza and an egg of indeterminate origin.

Furthermore, funding demands often conflict with the philosophies and aims of youth theatre companies. How can companies "empower" their members, give them control over the productions, enable them to express themselves on the subjects they want to talk about and open them up to what's artistically possible if the choice of subject and even choice of content is imposed upon them?

Process

Much of youth theatre today is for the performer first and the audience second. Youth theatre company members will, it is hoped, benefit psychologically and socially from the process of rehearsal and performance. "Product" is less important. Theatre becomes less of a display and more of a tool; more obviously functional. Similarly, not a criticism, just an observation that a different form of theatre has emerged.

Political Agenda/Ideology

This has become more and more crucial. To a large extent funding restrictions have determined this. Only the "most relevant" projects will be funded, and youth theatre companies have no choice but to ensure that their programmes appear relevant to the nth degree.

Whilst the idea of "relevant" theatre is great, the definition is woolly. What does "relevance" mean? Is a work relevant if it is set in 20th century Australia? Is it relevant because it deals with current issues, or is it relevant if the issues raised are perennial issues that still confront us today? Is a work that deals with continuing concerns any less relevant than one dealing with an issue peculiar to the 1990's?

The search for this amorphous "relevance" often inflicted on youth theatre companies by funding bodies

and often self-inflicted by companies and youth theatre workers who want their work to have positive effect on the community around them can stray into excess. Effectively, theatre becomes prostituted as propaganda and changes not just into another form, but into a less effective one. There's nothing wrong with a play that has, as its goal, making a youth audience aware of health issues or racism or the environment or condoms. It's only when the project transmogrifies into "trees good logs

bad" that it becomes a lecture. When the message becomes more important than anything else, you may as well have someone on stage with a megaphone screaming about their political interest.

In any form of communication, there is a role for each person or group and this can involve being communicated to as well as communicating. Theatre is no exception. The role of an audience may be more amorphous than usual, but it does play an active part in the theatrical process, just like the writer or performers.

Theatre that preaches a message at the expense of all else denies the audience its role in the process of communication and as a consequence, they turn off. Youth theatre especially gives its audience the chance to experience forms of communication quite different from their normal diet of restrictions and regulations, which are part of any school education. Authoritarian, proselytising theatre makes youth theatre workers glorified teachers and turns its audience back into students, rather than fairly equal parties in an exchange.

Worse, theatre that puts political messages above all else, is often boring. Drama relies on tension and conflict, often between opposing ideologies. It's what drives a play on and makes it interesting. If all characters agree with each other, if they all simply combine to give us an easily grasped political truism, then you don't have theatre, you've got *The Cosby Show*.

A play about logging is a recipe for tedious theatre if the loggers or owners of the pulping plant are stupid, ridiculous and hateful. Worse, such easily-digestible stereotypes reinforce existing beliefs. However, if this character is portrayed as a real one, with valid

“
**How can companies
'empower' their members,
give them control over the
productions, enable them to
express themselves on the
subjects they want to talk
about and open them up to
what's artistically possible if
the choice of subject and
even choice of content is
imposed upon them?**
”

justifications for his/her position, if we can see issues such as jobs versus trees; the way we rely on the product etc. honestly put forward, then we've got tension, drama, and the basis for hypothetical resolution of the issue.

Finally, when political "soundness" is forced willy-nilly upon a theatrical scene, the issues become distorted. A situation which is complex becomes black and white. The very way the situation is presented limits the choice

of response; the question pre-empted the answer. The reply to the question "Who is responsible for the evil logging that goes on in Australia?" is unsurprisingly "The evil loggers." The complicated issues of why we log and what the alternatives are, are excluded.

Two responses are possible to this sort of theatre. Firstly, the audience goes away with a simplistic view of the issue, often one that

encourages intolerance. Secondly, theatre becomes so unreal, so distinct from actual events that it ceases to connect with its audience at all. This results in an assumption by audience members that the play's really talking to someone else.

This isn't only damaging to the power of the specific production but to theatre in general. If theatre sets out to be relevant, and yet portrays unreal situations, audiences won't engage in it at all, and theatre will ironically have less and less relevance.

Further, when we make "relevance" or economic profitability or "cultural democracy" the priority of theatre, when we qualify its benefits and measure theatre on scales of topicality or profitability, we create a situation where theatre is judged as having failed if it does not live up to this criterion.

The Economic Impact Study on the 1988 Adelaide Festival of Arts found that "...the 1988 Festival generated \$7.1 million of production in Adelaide." Loud cheers and much bottle-induced glee. However, if the next Festival generates \$6.1 million it will be considered less of a success. Stephen MacDonald, from the Centre for SA

Economic Studies who produced the review, concludes by saying:

"While this study has confirmed the economic advantages of the Adelaide Festival, it is not meant to imply that this should be the only criteria on which to justify the event."

Very true, but the risk is that we only remember the figures. When we make economic profitability the justification for the Festival, or any production, we stand or fall by its balance sheet.

Similarly when we make "relevance" the major consideration in youth theatre, a production that is not set in the 1990's about a topical issue may be considered a less laudable piece of theatre, regardless of other considerations.

On the other side of the coin, I can foresee a situation where the

ideological correctness of a work becomes its priority. The implication is that the more politically sound a production is, the better theatre it is.

The state of scientific research in Australia is directly analogous. "Science" just like "Arts" is being forced to justify itself economically; only research which is obviously directed towards a foreseeable social or commercial profit is guaranteed of funding. Much non-specific "research for research sake" is being abandoned. The problem here is that rarely can one predict what the results or implications of one's research are going to be. The discovery of penicillin is the classic case of an accidental discovery. Fleming was *actually* looking for a cure for warts, or a way to recreate the taste of chicken for an instant soup manufacturer, or making himself lunch. History (or my memory) is vague on this point. The bottom line is that he discovered penicillin instead. In today's climate he would not have been able to do so. Untrammelled research may not be economically viable, but when scientific research is forced only into areas that are obviously useful, it is ironically made less useful.

Similarly, youth theatre companies are doing the best



they can in an economic climate that demands that projects have obvious "relevance." When theatre is allowed to take risks, it is often relevant. When it is forced into topicality, by sponsorship requirements it often becomes less relevant and less interesting.

However, while external factors such as the economic climate may be outside youth theatre companies' control, many internal factors are not. We need to ask ourselves whether we sometimes unconsciously patronise our audiences merely because we're older than they are.

The "we won't make it too complicated - but it's like this" mentality is implied in some youth theatre, and it is often unnecessary. Youth are often no less sophisticated than adults and their access to television and media at an early age gives them the ability to synthesise material *more* quickly than most adults. Just watch a video clip and try to pick all the images, or the ultimate humiliation, play a video game with an eight year old.

Advertisers long ago learnt the secret; there is no great intellectual difference between a 12 year old and a 50 year old. Advertisements don't increase in sophistication as the age of the target market segment increases; if anything, they can be less sophisticated. Just look at the current advertisement for laundry detergent which features a teddy bear falling out of a tree into a basket of fluffy towels. To assume that some issues are more pertinent to youth audiences is fine but to assume that we have to play down to them, or that they have a need to be *taught* certain issues is not.

A good test for a piece of theatre is to ask how an "adult" audience would react to the same piece of theatre. If we wouldn't show it to adults, then perhaps it's not fit for young people either. Television or cinema makes few allowances for youth audiences, so why should theatre?

Certainly theatre should seek to educate but it needs to be very careful about how it educates. Education in regard to content is fine as long as it is a process that opens up possibilities rather than presenting an audience with a single one. What is often neglected is education and form; and an examination of what is possible in methods of dramatic presentation. We should be educating audiences in new possibilities rather than old ideologies. We need to be saying; "This is what's possible. These new forms are worth thinking about" rather than; "*Think this!*"

It is questions of form that are more properly the concern of theatre. Actors, artistic directors and designers are all qualified in their particular fields, and most have trained for several years. They haven't, however, spent three years reading and discussing the

issues of the day, what complex factors go towards causing them, and how we can begin to try to make even a slight change in our current social and political situation. It's exactly the same for administrators and funding bodies; few of them are experts in the political and social systems of our world. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves; "What are we good at?"

Obviously content is vital, and obviously any attempt to erase the political content of theatre is as bad as making it the be-all and the end-all. But it's one thing to produce a piece of theatre *about* an issue, and quite another to use theatre to put forward our own personal opinions. Is our first priority to promote and encourage new and innovative theatrical forms about relevant issues, or is it to tell the audience what to think?

So how should we deal with political agenda in youth theatre? Steven Graton, Artistic Director of Magpie Theatre, suggests a couple of solutions. Firstly, he notes that concerns of political soundness tend to inhibit or censor the creative process. He believes actors can't be completely free to create if they spend their time worrying if they're reinforcing the dominant paradigm. In the September 1988 edition of *Lowdown*, Steven suggests that editing and cutting, according to the dictates of political ideology should happen towards the end of rehearsal when new material is no longer being generated. He quotes Hilary Gow: "Political theory can act pre-emptively in the practice of making theatre ... it can however provide a framework for evaluating theatre."

Secondly, he suggests that issues should be allowed to "percolate", and not be sand-blasted onto our consciousness. Theatre should be *about* issues rather than being the issues themselves; forcing a solution onto an audience, turning a complex issue into black and white or telling us what to think. If theatre presents the situation truthfully, if it shows both sides, we will not only get a fairer picture and a less patronising tone, but a more interesting and exciting artform. Present the situation honestly and let it percolate. Trust the audience. Theatre will be no less relevant or effective for it.

In the end we're there to provide a theatrical experience and not just another educational adjunct.

Youth theatre companies do a job that few people want to do, even less want to pay for, and of which almost none in the wider community realise the benefits.

No-one denies this. However, self-congratulation is the worst possible response. In a world that seems fairly hostile of youth theatre, we need to take Roy Slaven and H.G. Nelson's "long hard look in the room of mirrors" or we'll end up as teachers with a flair for the dramatic, rather than the other way around. ●