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# NEW VISIONS,

Why is the New Visions/New Voices Festival of New Works for Young Audiences regarded so highly for its development of new plays? Lowdown Editor Tony Mack travels to Washington DC to find out – and to follow the progress of Windmill Performing Arts, Australia's first creative team to take part.

Shortly after his successful re-staging of 'Away', the Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre Company, Michael Gow, was in the rehearsal room again – this time directing the creative development of the Windmill Performing Arts production of 'Grail'. This new work by Rosalba Clemente, former Artistic Director of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, would seem to be a uniquely Australian tale touching on the Grail legend that links the dysfunctional relationships of a farming family with the dysfunction of European Australians' relationships to the land.

While the six actors were responding to the multi-layered text with a focused intensity and excitement, Clemente was responding to the creative input of the director and cast with daily re-writes. Sitting quietly at the back of the rehearsal room near Windmill Creative Producer Cate Fowler, I felt I was in the presence of a first class creative team and quickly forgot to notice something quite curious

– that Clemente's text was being delivered in American accents by accomplished Washington actors.

I was, of course, in Washington DC, USA at New Visions/New Voices, a festival of new works for young audiences. The festival takes place every two years at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the nation's performing arts centre and a 'living' presidential memorial. The Kennedy Center is a Washington landmark, an enormous white building on the banks of the Potomac River (and next door to the Watergate Hotel) that presents more than 3,000 performances a year. Founded by the current Co-Directors, Deirdre Kelly Lavrakas and Kim Peter Kovac, New Visions/New Voices is a program of the Kennedy Center's Education Department, which has reached over eleven million people in the past year.

According to Darrell M. Ayers, Vice-President for Education, the goal of the festival when it started fifteen years ago, 'was to create an environment to help nurture and develop new works for young audiences. Each year we support playwrights, directors, and theaters as they explore new and exciting theater for young audiences. For the first time, we are delighted to have international projects and artists from Australia and England as part of the festival.'

The participation of an Australian company in this previously all-American festival was made possible by the Australia Council for the Arts. The Theatre Board and CPMD (Community Partnerships and Market Development) division not only ensured a place for an Australian company, but also hosted a reception on the opening night and promoted Australian companies, productions, playscripts and artists working in the theatre for young people (TYP) sector to the highly influential US participants of New Visions/New Voices.

Australia's participation in New Visions/New Voices gave me a chance to find the answers to some questions I've had ever since I first learnt about this festival, rated by Lisa Mulcahy in 'Theater Festivals' as one of the top festivals in the world for new work. What is it about New Visions that makes it such a special experience for US practitioners? How do the Co-Directors create an environment where, consistently, good work can develop? Certainly, US practitioners still talk about the excitement of being present at the development of David Saar's 'The Yellow Boat' (1991) or Laurie Brook's 'The Wrestling Season' (1998), and a list of previous New Visions plays includes such celebrated work as Y. York's 'The Afternoon of the Elves', Lawrence Yep's 'Dragonwings', and James Still's 'In the Suicide Mountains'.



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Photo: New Visions Co-Director Kim Peter Kovac and the 'factoids' of the day.

# NEW VOICES

Some answers were apparent before I arrived. In looking at the selection process it's important to note that NewVisions is theatre-driven. The Co-Directors aren't looking for unsolicited scripts, but unproduced plays (or ideas, scenarios or treatments) that a specific theatre company intends to stage. Right at the start there is a commitment to the work that comes not just from the playwright but a theatre company. The theatre submits a full proposal, the script in its current state and a director/playwright team.

And while there's an exhaustive two-part adjudication process, there's also an element of curation in the final selection of plays. 'Other factors are in the mix, diversity in all its forms – cultural, geographic, the size of the theatre', says Co-Director Kim Peter Kovac. 'We try to find a mix of shows for the festival as a whole – plays for different age groups, a mix of musicals and non-musicals, etc.' As I would shortly find out, the intelligent curatorial choices made for interesting connections between the works and created more of a balanced 'festival' experience for participants.

Arriving in Washington, I made my way to the Kennedy Center to be greeted by the perennially friendly staff and led through the

bowels of the building to the rehearsal rooms of the various creative teams. As promised, it was a diverse bunch of works. Ric Averill's 'Dream Carved of Stone', directed by Nancy Halverson, tells the true story of Korczak Ziolkowski's quest to carve a massive statue of Crazy Horse from a mountain in the Black Hills of South Dakota. 'Tale of a West Texas Marsupial Girl', by playwright Lisa D'Amour with composer Sxip Shirey and director Whit MacLaughlin, is the wonderfully wacky musical story of a girl born in a small Texas town with a kangaroo-like pouch. Lydia R. Diamond's 'Harriet Jacobs', directed by Hallie Gordon, was based on one of the few existing slave narratives written by a woman, following her journey from servitude in North Carolina to liberty in the North. The magic realist 'Wild Horses', by playwright Rhiana Yazzie and directed by Randy Reinholz, jumps back and forth in time in telling the story of Rose Mary, a thirteen year-old girl from the Tongva, Los Angeles' Indigenous people. The kind of urban legends that teenagers love was the subject of Laura Schellhardt's 'The K of D', directed by Laura Kepley. A one-woman show enacted by a girl who may just be the main character, 'The K of D' explores a slightly creepy, small town world where Charlotte's brother

kissed her before he died – now they say that anyone she kisses dies...

'Spellshock', from London's Unicorn Theatre, was the only other international entry apart from Windmill Performing Arts' 'The Grail'. Directed by Tony Graham, it is a new interpretation of composer Maurice Ravel's 'L'Enfant et les Sortilèges' with a libretto by Carl Miller that opens up a range of object theatre possibilities within the narrative of a children's opera about a naughty child's temper that brings the furniture in her room to life.

Watching rehearsals, the quality of casting delivered another answer to my questions – it was of a very high standard, and appeared to respond more to the internal demands of the role than to physical type. Co-Director Deirdre Lavrakas had cast from a pool of Washington DC actors, who the director and writer worked with for five days before presenting the play as a rehearsed reading. (Due to the nature of the one-woman show 'The K of D', the Trinity Repertory Company from Rhode Island brought their own actor, Ginger Eckert.)

While obviously having markedly different approaches, there was a quiet intensity common to rehearsals, particularly in the interactions

'...a place of convergence where... artists are fully supported, and their work is introduced before a national body of theatre for young audience professionals. New Visions/ New Voices is one of our nation's treasures.'

Jose Cruz Gonzalez, Playwright

between director/playwright teams. By day four most of the initial major re-writes had been done – one estimate was a collective 800 pages of re-writes in five days – and the focus had begun to shift to the presentation of the rehearsed reading. Numerous changes continued to be made though, especially in response to the input of the actors.

On Friday 19 May, over a hundred New Visions/ New Voices participants from around the USA arrived at the Kennedy Center's Family Theater, which was opened only last year on 2 December. To give an idea of the impact of this group on American theatre for young audiences in 2005, the 20 or so ASSITEJ USA companies represented played to over 2,600,000 people and had a combined budget of over \$US41 million. In addition were representatives of other theatres, festivals, publishing houses and universities.

Another answer immediately became apparent to my question, 'What is it about New Visions that makes it such a special experience for US practitioners?' Watching colleagues greet each other, I could recognise New Visions as a vitally important meeting place for US practitioners where they can focus on the development of the work and make connections with their peers. As opposed to arts markets, the role of registered participants is not to buy or sell but to assist in and witness the development of the next wave of theatre for young audiences.

The Australia Council for the Arts reception at 7.30pm got a great response from New Visions participants and collaborators. Taking place in the Kennedy Center Jazz Club on the Roof Terrace, I had the great privilege of giving a speech thanking the Kennedy Center and US practitioners for their welcome and hospitality, and proudly acknowledging the talented Windmill team. As good guests, the Australia Council did the right thing and brought the drinks and food, and I spent the next hour greeting old friends from my visit to the Bonderman Festival in Indianapolis last year and answering questions and giving contact details for Australian theatre for young people companies. The CPMD and Theatre Board had assembled a great range of resources that disappeared quickly, providing everything from cultural portals such as websites to details of tour-ready shows and synopses of recent Australian TYP plays.

The next day participants returned to watch the rehearsed readings continue, with the reading of 'Grail' a highlight of the festival. At times quirky, at other times poignant, there was always a strong thematic core that lent it a sense of weight and purpose, and there was

'NewVoices/NewVisions was an extraordinary experience. What an opportunity!! It gave us the chance to test our script with an international audience and we were thrilled to discover that the work resonated with an audience wider than Australia. The issues, setting, characters had a universal appeal, recognition and acceptance. We also experienced the dramaturgical/creative development process that the Kennedy Center has refined – our writer said she learnt more in one week than she would have over an 18-month period. We hope our Grail script joins the ranks of successful play scripts that have been developed in this wonderful program.'

Cate Fowler Director/Creative Producer, Windmill Performing Arts

widespread disbelief that such a mature work was Clemente's first play. The combination of producer Cate Fowler, director Michael Gow, playwright Rosalbe Clemente and their Washington cast was inspired, and the feedback from New Visions delegates after the reading was extremely positive.

The quality of the US work overall was of a very high standard, with music playing a strong part in a number of productions. 'Tale of a West Texas Marsupial Girl', commissioned by the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis, had a great sense of fun, with the music by Sxip



Photo from L to R: Cate Fowler, Michael Gow, Rosalbe Clemente and the Australian Embassy's Lori Hogan and Gillian Aird.

'There is no agenda except to help form and experiment with the given piece – and all this...in an atmosphere charged by all the other creative...teams. **New Visions** raises the bar for theater for young audiences, for when an institution as important as the Kennedy Center feels the work is vital, we as artists bring our best to the table.'

Deborah Wicks La Puma, Composer

Shirey and character of Dr. Pouch contributing a quirky and funky feel to the reading. In contrast, the spiritual and gospel music of 'Harriet Jacobs', from the Steppenwolf Theatre of Chicago, lent a weight and seriousness to this very personal account of the human cost of slavery and oppression.

A personal favourite was the Trinity Repertory Company's 'K of D'. Using the urban mythology of teen culture, it's a marvellous piece of one-person storytelling in a tradition that goes back to Edgar Allen Poe, ideal for 10 year-olds up and, I would think, of great interest for the hard-to-engage male teen audience. As with a number of US companies, the Trinity Repertory Company of Providence, Rhode Island has a strong association with a university – Brown University – and the playwright Laura Schellhardt, director Laura Kepley and actor Ginger Eckert are all graduates of the Brown University/Trinity Rep consortium. Noting the benefits of these relationships to US companies,

I can only commend Australian collaborations such as those between Out of the Box Festival in Brisbane and the Queensland University of Technology or Theatre of Image and Macquarie University, and hope the trend grows locally.

One thing that Australia could learn from was in the quality of discourse exhibited in post-show discussions. While a festival for new work rather than for playwrights, it was clear that the processes of NewVisions supported and respected writers. Discussion Facilitator Jeff Church, Producing Artistic Director of the Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, took audience members through the first few steps of the seven-step Liz Lerman Critical Response Process. Step One consisted of affirmations from the audience, detailing moments where they connected with the work. Step Two entailed questions from the creative team to the audience, and it was only a few times that discussion reached Step Three, where audience members could ask questions seeking clarification rather than delivering opinions.

The end result was a world away from situations I have witnessed where writers were forced to endure unstructured and unsupportive discussion about their work, with anyone free to stand up and hold forth about the perceived weaknesses of the work and how they would have done it better.

Flying back to Australia, I felt that I had the answers to my questions... The Kennedy Center staff – not only the Co-Directors but also David Polk, Kirsten L. Aymer, Michael

'New Visions/New Voices has nurtured some of the most important new plays in the American Theater for Young Audiences repertoire, [with] many...produced all over the country. What's even more significant... is the profound impact that **NV/NV** has had on the... development of the national field.'

Scot Copeland, Artistic Director, Nashville Children's Theatre

Chamberlain, Jessica Chang, Gregg Henry, Michelle Kozlak, Elif Sonmez, Jordan Spencer and Lisa Ueki – and US practitioners have created an open and supportive environment dedicated to the development of new work. Subtle and sophisticated choices in selection, casting, dramaturgy and post-show discussion create an atmosphere where extraordinary progress can happen, and where participants can make deep connections with their peers.

New Visions/New Voices sets an international benchmark for best practice in youth arts, and fulfils a function of bringing its country's practitioners together to talk about the work. I can't help feeling it exposes a gap in Australian practice and professional development – maybe we should look at that.

TONY MACK

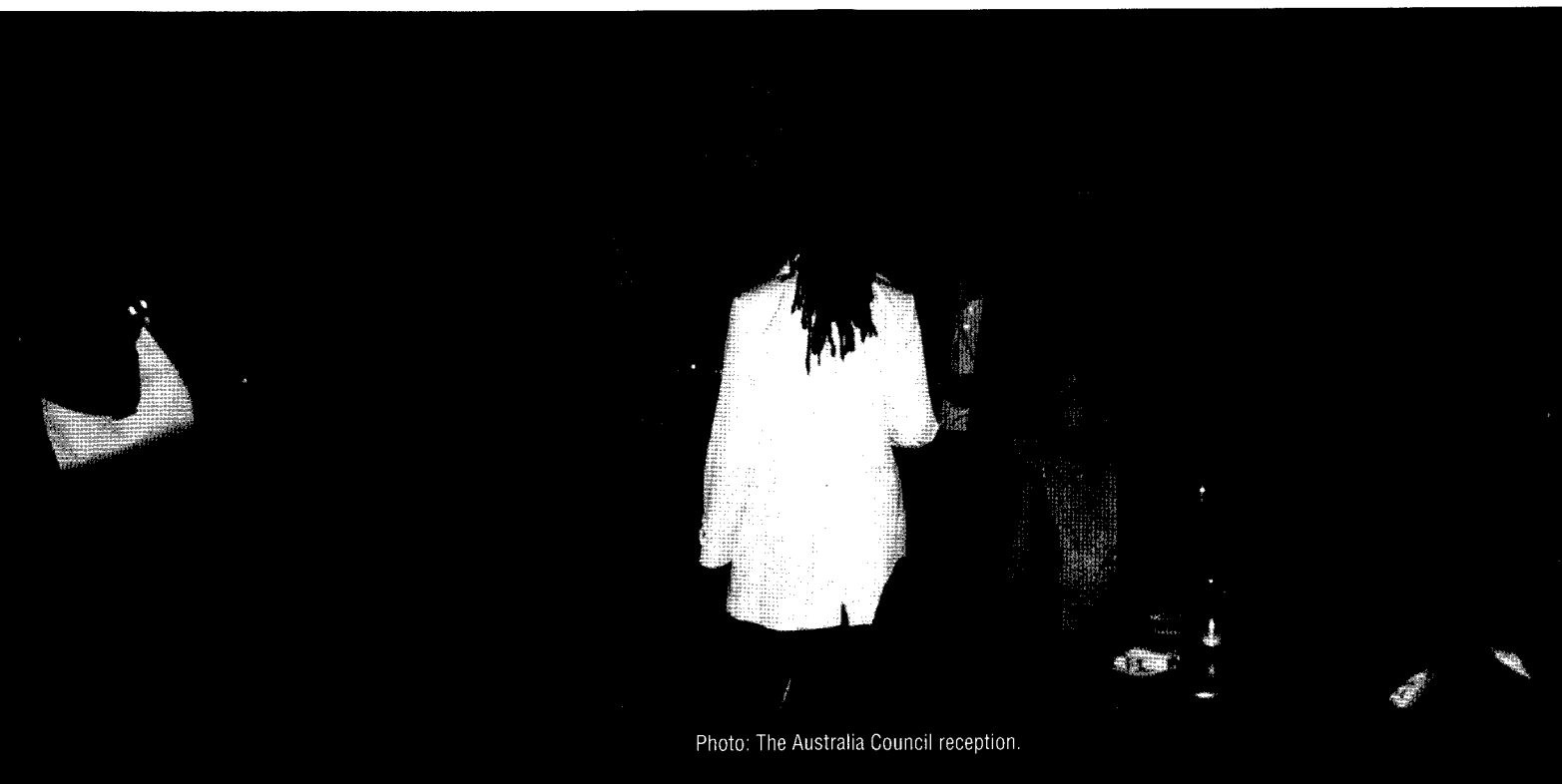


Photo: The Australia Council reception.