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# LOWDOWN

YOUTH PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

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The 80's saw an overwhelming number of issue-based projects in youth performing arts. Despite this, one group has remained resolutely marginalised.

by **Peter Wood**

# WHEN silence IS NOT GOLDEN

**T**he 1990's saw theatre for and by young people exploring the issues of oppressed groups in Australian society. This resulted in a marked increase in awareness among youth arts professionals (and youth theatre participants) of the needs of certain groups of young people identified as being particularly oppressed, powerless and needy. Groups whose needs have been identified as worthy of special attention include young women, young black people, the young unemployed, disabled and homeless. There is, however, one category of young people which cuts across all these, whose needs have been almost entirely overlooked by the youth arts movement - young gay people.

The type of work we see being created for and by young people today can be applauded on many levels in its attempt to address the oppression of our disenfranchised youth, and indeed some of the more

radical examples of Australian theatre can be located in the youth arts arena. I have no quarrel with this work. My concern is the continuing silence that surrounds the issue of young gay people. Why the silence?

There is to begin with, the obvious; we as a western society have yet to make clear and unequivocal declarations concerning the rights of homosexuals. Until we have acknowledged the rights of individuals to form sexual relationships with members of the same sex, free of punishment and prejudice, then obviously there will be confusion, fear and bigotry surrounding the rights of homosexuals. To take the volatile issue of homosexuality and to add to it the element of young people is to open up a debate of gigantic proportions that carries with it all the emotional vitriol of a lynching party. The recent outcry in Adelaide concerning the graphics of a poster

used to advertise a 'gay' play showed how the two areas of homosexuality and youth can generate some very heated and reactionary responses. The poster depicted two men, under water, in an embrace. The outcry? - a fear that young boys exposed to this image would somehow be 'encouraged to adopt a homosexual lifestyle'. (Dale Baker, leader of the South Australian opposition). As it was pointed out during a debate on the ABC (yes, it got that far!) why has it not been suggested that the heterosexual imagery that surrounds us, in abundance, could have an adverse effect on the sexual development of young gay males.

This is more than just a clever retort, it is a valid point that needs discussion and debate. As L. Moran suggests "...an alternative voice is denied by the use of the idea that when homosexuals speak of homosexuality they are necessarily involved in seduction, this not being a factor in talking of heterosexuality."

(Les Moran 1989 *Homosexuals in Law*). Just the sort of thing I would hope to see a youth theatre company tackle!

Unfortunately the likelihood of this is slim; why? To find some answers I spoke to Gavin Strawhan (Freelance Writer).

"My area of concern is writing about gay people for a gay or straight audience where the principal subject is about being gay. For me as a straight writer, I see it as the domain of gay writers. If I was working in a theatre company, I would of course be involved in productions that located gay characters and I would encourage them but in the same way that I couldn't write from a black point of view I couldn't write from a gay point of view. It's a very risky area when you're talking about a point of view - who are you writing for and

about? I wouldn't presume to write for a gay audience about gay issues. I would, however, feel that it was within my scope when writing a play about other things to include a gay character as opposed to writing from a gay point of view. I've actually got a bit of a gag reflex to issue based theatre at the moment anyway! What I'd like to be able to do is feel that I could include gay characters in my plays without the pressure of having to speak for all gay people. For example, when I was writing *The Last Drive-In on Earth* (Troupe Theatre, Adelaide Festival production), a play about teenage sexuality, I wanted to include a gay character. Although



The controversial 'Swimmers' poster

the play was work-shopped with the company, a lot of the characters I wrote about were autobiographical. One of the characters I wanted to include in the play was a 15 year old gay girl, but there was a lot of resistance from the gay women in the company to do this, for two reasons:

One was that they themselves hadn't discovered their 'gay-ness' until they were in their late teens to early twenties and they thought it was inaccurate to represent gay women as being aware of their sexuality at 15, which is an example of the problems of representation. While not every heterosexual member of that company had had their first sexual experience at 15,

they didn't see any problem in representing the heterosexual characters but because the gay women hadn't had their first gay experience until later they felt that it was misrepresenting the usual gay situation. So immediately you have the problem of representation where you have a gay character and that gay character has to represent everyone's experience, which I think is a problem for writing full, rounded characters. The second problem was that as soon as we gave the gay character any dramatic interest, which in this case was the relationship with her best friend, in which she found her feelings of friendship were turning to ones of

lust, immediately everyone was afraid we were representing gay women as predatory. So you have a situation where what is most dramatically interesting in relation to that person's character, cannot be portrayed, because people see it as representing the worst aspects of gayness. People came up with 'problem areas' and they passed over it as if to say 'It's a real problem so we'll go on to something that's not as much of a problem'.

That's what happened in

*Drive-in*, the gay character was virtually written out of it."

**A**n excuse that is sometimes offered to justify the lack of work that deals directly with young gay people is the controvertible legalities surrounding homosexuality and young men aged under 18. This argument might hold more weight were it not for the fact that similar legal problems have not compromised our work on issues such as child abuse (eg, *Don't Tell Anyone*: Toe-Truck, 1989), nor has it restricted us from looking at issues surrounding young people under the age of 16 who are engaged in sexually active relationships (eg, *Couple of Kids*: Magpie 1989). If



'The Last Drive-In On Earth'

legalities are the main issue why have we not seen youth theatre concerning itself with lesbianism? A sexual choice that although stigmatised and surrounded by bigotry, has enjoyed greater liberality in the eyes of the law. The legal thin ice that surrounds homosexuality cannot be cited as the cause for the silence that continues in the youth arts arena.

**A**nother excuse comes in the form of denial, denial that there is such a thing as gay youth who need to be addressed. Precise figures regarding the number of gay people in our society are hard to produce (the historical violence associated with coming out in a heterosexual world should explain why) but it would be safe to say that there are more than most people think. For every person that has declared their homosexuality there are tens to hundreds who have remained in the closet. There are many reasons for this. In a country where at a recent state election a National Party slogan read, "If you want a queer for a neighbour, vote Labor", where 'queer' bashing provides cheap thrills and sacking lesbians is a way of life, who can blame the kids for keeping their sexual preferences hidden? Many studies have produced widely differing percentages of the number of gay people in our society, from a conservative 4% to an unlikely 20%. Regardless of which statistic you choose to accept, we must acknowledge the fact that there is a

more than likely chance that young gay people are involved in youth theatre and are a part of our audience. Why then are we not aware of them? Where are the particular responses to their needs (ie; theatre that explores their sexuality?) Why are we not producing theatre that speaks clearly and directly to them? Where is their empowerment? How do we accommodate the needs of young people, who identify as gay, in our youth theatre companies? I put

forward these questions to Michael Doneman (Director of Contact Youth Theatre, Queensland).

"It's more than that for me. It's not simply the question of accommodating people who identify themselves as gay, it's recognising that a certain proportion of them are and making the effort to reach them. It's not just a responsive thing; you have to be pro-active. That's the problem at the same time - how do you go about doing that? You know there will be a penalty for doing that, it probably won't spell disaster for the company, but you know you'll lose good kids because their parents will become paranoid, thinking their kids may be molested or something like that. That sort of bigotry exists. So, it becomes a political question on a number of different levels. As to why we haven't addressed this so far, it's a bit like my own personal experience with Aboriginal people.

I was in my early 30's by the time I actually came across the issue of Aboriginal culture and the politics

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of Aboriginality in my own country, simply by virtue of the fact that in my education process, from secondary to tertiary, it had never been taught. I had rarely met an Aboriginal person. Now, while I've known gay people in theatre, the question of homosexuality as something to spend time on has been influenced by my straight, middle class, white, male background and up-bringing. So it's a question of addressing this issue myself and for my colleagues in the company. We should do this by working in a way that presents homosexual people as role models, as successful, as winners, not only in their portrayal on stage but in the process of work-shopping, the process of decision-making and power-sharing in the company. It's like all these other questions, like the environment question that I'm looking at now and the question of women and so on, it starts at your own garden door. You look after your own patch first and I think the rest follows. You look after sustaining yourself in the first instance, then you go out into longer ranged projects. You start asking yourself questions like, 'how many gay people do we have in the company?', 'what sort of say do they have?', 'are they part of the aboriginals we are employing?' - the women we are employing?', 'how can we benefit from their perspective and how do we ensure that the gay people in our company (kids and personnel) contribute to the development of the company?'

**P**robably the biggest problem that faces our young gay audience and youth theatre participants is the ubiquitous assumption that everyone is heterosexual. Although their oppression may be denied and their needs overlooked, at least young women, young black and young disabled people are acknowledged to be what and who they are. The youth arts movement has been brave and determined in its attack on negative images of women, blacks and the disabled - but rarely has the heterosexist

nature of those images come under fire. We provide strong role models and images in our theatre that go a long way towards attacking the sexism and racism of dominant ideology, but rarely have I seen an affirming image of a homosexual in a youth theatre production, be it by young people or for young people. Gay characters are sometimes located but rarely are they affirmed. Steve Gration (Director of Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre Company in the Northern Territory) spoke about some of the problems associated with the representation of gay people in youth theatre productions;



A bad image: Vic AIDS Council advertisement

"It's very complicated and I haven't come up with any formula that can safely and sensitively represent gay people and gay issues without making them part of a targeted group. In some ways, to target gay issues and then make a show about it is to isolate that group by saying we have to do a special play about you because you're not a 'normal part of humanity'. So what we need is ways to develop plays where gay role models are a normal part of the process of the exploration of a text. We're at a point now in youth theatre history where we need to lead the way on questions such as sexuality and, in particular, gay issues."

**T**he question of *why* remains.

Why have the issues that face young gay people been absent from the youth arts agenda? Why have the gay bureaucrats and professionals within the youth arts movement not championed the cause? Why is it that our funding agencies insist that we justify our applications in terms of anti-sexist content, multicultural relevance and innovative approach, and not include a desire for its client companies to address the issues of sexuality, a major component of a young person's identity? Angela Chaplin (Artistic Director of Magpie Theatre and former board member of the Australia Council) put forward some ideas on the subject.

"The Australia Council consists of artists who are responsible for making decisions and policies. The decisions and policies of the Australia Council are thus a reflection of the agendas that those artists are taking to those meetings, and they need to be taking the sexuality agenda to those meetings. I remember when I was working on the Performing Arts Board we were discussing how to phrase the new booklet. One of the things we talked about was the use of the term 'non-dominant culture'. For me this was a way of saying that there is a gay culture, a womens culture, cultures that exist outside of the dominant male heterosexual ideology.

From my experience on the board I would have to say that they don't get an equivalent percentage of applications that address 'gay issues' but the point to make is that an open door policy is never enough, we have to be pro-active. The Council did get pro-active and produced a booklet on 'women in the arts' and said it was to be a priority. It also has as a priority people from non-english speaking backgrounds. So it may well be that the Council needs to address its policy in regard to sexuality. I guess it's as much of a political hot cake for them as it is for us, as client companies, but I think a request to place sexuality on the pro-active agenda should be put to the

Australia Council. It's a two way street. I think client companies need to adopt a pro-active policy in regard to sexuality as much as the Australia Council needs to, and this puts the ball into the court of those of us in programming positions.

If artists stay within the accepted, received boundaries of morality in our culture then art will not continue to develop. Good art has always challenged those beliefs. The good thing about doing interviews like this is that it makes you honest, and I must admit that I haven't been pro-active as a director in initiating projects that address gay concerns. However, I think it's true to say that I don't have images or language in my work that is derogatory towards gay people and unfortunately I don't think that's always the case in young peoples theatre. I dismay when I see kids acknowledging stereotyped images of gay people. There is no one taking responsibility for those images, we still see theatre that goes for those cheap laughs. Kids are being fed that stuff from television and that's one of our responsibilities, to counteract the negative images of television with our theatre; my God, Steve Vizard still gets a laugh when he lisps. He would say it's just a person who lisps - but we all know who's at the butt of the cheap laugh."

**N**o discussion of homosexuality seems possible these days without reference to AIDS and HIV infection. For the purposes of this article I include these issues as further examples of the obstacles that face young gay people today. The AIDS epidemic as portrayed and manipulated by the straight (gutter) press, presents young people with convincing arguments to remain in the closet about their sexuality. Indeed, the treatment of these issues by the straight media adds further to the guilt and repression associated with being gay in our heterosexist society. Here I see an obvious opportunity for youth theatre to speak not only to its gay audience and participants but also to its

straight audience that feel safely distanced and often superior in relation to the issue of AIDS. We must be careful, however, that we don't make gay theatre and illness synonymous. It is the area of sexuality that must be placed on the agenda of the youth arts and not merely a health message. David Benedict (Joint Artistic Director of Gay Sweatshop, London) pointed that out:

"Twenty years on from now when, God willing, we find a cure for this virus we want to look back and see a gay community that continued to develop and celebrate a positive image of its sexuality, and not one that fell to the negative images that the straight world propagated. AIDS must of course be addressed and the gay response to it so far has been swift and powerful but we can't let this epidemic push aside other important work on the gay movement's agenda."

**T**he problems I have raised are long term and can't be solved with

tokenism, in the same way we have learnt that sexism and racism must not be treated with tokenism, but we must begin to address them. Young gay people must be included on our agendas when we tackle the questions of oppression. We have a clear choice ahead of us: We can decide to commit ourselves fully to the needs and interests of all young people - including those who identify as gay, even if this causes us some personal discomfort and confused feelings. Or we can concentrate on those whose conditions and struggles we feel safer with, whose problems have more status and therefore find more support. If this is the case we will let young gay people remain where they are in relation to the youth arts - denied and marginalised. Let's break the silence.



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