

Introducing the Review

The Manager of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council, John Baylis, gives youth arts practitioners the background to the recently announced review of theatre for young people.

The Theatre Board of the Australia Council funds a wide variety of performance genres and practices, from circus to playwriting, from street theatre to community-based work, from puppetry to youth theatre. And theatre for young people is right there with all the others, a central part of the Board's brief.

The Theatre Board has no policy specifically on theatre for young people, any more than it has a policy on circus, playwriting, or a range of other practices or genres. Those of you with long memories will recall the then Performing Arts Board's policy document from December 1991 called 'Notes and Resolutions'. This is the last policy statement dealing specifically with theatre for young people, and its influence on Australia Council funding ceased in 1996 with the dismantling of the Performing Arts Board and the restructuring of our grant categories. Since then, theatre for young people has competed on the same basis as all applicants to the Theatre Board – in the same funding categories, against the same criteria, for the same pool of funds.

Some have argued that this is as it should be, that it is healthy for theatre for young people to be viewed in the context of the vast diversity of contemporary practices that vie for Theatre Board funds. Others have argued that it is a field with a particular relationship to its audience and with particular importance to the future of the artform. Arguments aside, we believe it is time to reassess the situation and review the current circumstances in which theatre for young people is operating

The NSW Ministry for the Arts proposed this joint review to the Board and shares with us a concern about the current situation. We are seeking guidance on the way forward. I hope this review will be welcomed by all who are interested in providing great theatre experiences for young people. By vigorously taking part you will be helping to shape the future.

John Baylis

Manager, Theatre Board

The objectives of the review

The objectives of the review are to gather and analyse information to provide:

- a clearer understanding of the subsidised theatre for young people sector in Australia; and
- advice to the Theatre Board and the NSW Ministry for the Arts to assist them in setting their priorities for expenditure and policy development over the next 3–5 years

In that context, the review should include:

- identifying and analysing the links between theatre for young people and the school education system
- identifying and analysing the factors that have caused changes in this sector over the last ten years
- identifying and describing best practice models, documenting the philosophies, practices and structures that contribute to the creation and delivery of high quality work to young audiences
- examining the interaction between the TYP sector and the broader arts sector
- examining the cost structure of work produced for young people, especially in comparison with work created for adult audiences
- examining the various ways in which theatre for young people reaches and develops its audience, and the challenges and opportunities that result
- examining the international situation and compare with that in Australia
- making recommendations on how funding bodies could make better use of their limited resources to encourage better artistic experiences for young people.

The scope of the review

The focus of the review is primarily on the subsidised sector, though it should include a brief overview of the entire theatre for young people sector and comment on the competitive environment in which the subsidised sector operates.

The Australia Council defines young people as up to and including 26 years old. The review should acknowledge and discuss the different requirements and circumstances that apply to companies making work for the various segments within this overall group.

The process for achieving the review's objectives will involve the consultant making contact with every subsidised organisation in Australia that has regularly created theatre work for young people at some time in the last ten years. This would include theatre-in-education companies, in-theatre work specifically aimed at young people, puppetry companies, the education programs of state theatre companies and other project-based groups. In the case of organisations that no longer exist, the consultant should attempt to make contact with former key personnel.

The review should acknowledge that work for young audiences is often produced by youth theatres using young people as participants, and comment on the impact and implications of this model.

The review should survey current funding structures for theatre for young people. It should also examine current policies and practices regarding TYP within the education authorities throughout Australia, with particular emphasis on NSW.

The review should also conduct a survey of relevant international material accessible from within Australia, and will include consultation with the arts funding agencies of all

Reviewing Theatre for Young People

With the announcement of a review into theatre for young people and yet more funding cuts to NSW companies arising from the September Assessment Meeting of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council, the future of theatre for young people has become the hottest topic in youth performing arts. Lowdown believes it's time for informed and frank discussion on this issue, and has commissioned Jane Woollard to open up the debate.

Arts funding for TYP/Children's theatre needs to be about quality, fairness and wise public spending.

(from Theatre for Young People in Australia, discussion paper by J. McLean and S. Richer, commissioned by Australia Council Theatre Board, March 2001)

At an Australia Council Theatre Board policy meeting in early 2001, the Board looked at Theatre for Young People (TYP) in Australia. A paper was commissioned from Judith McLean (QUT) and Susan Richer (Out of the Box) – its purpose being not to create policy, but to be provocative and prompt discussion. At this meeting the Board decided it needed more information about the theatre for young people sector. Further action was put on hold while the Small to Medium Performing Arts Examination was undertaken by the Cultural Ministers Council. In May 2002 the NSW Ministry for the Arts approached the Australia Council, proposing a joint project to get an overview of theatre for young people, and this was the catalyst for the Board deciding at its September 2002 meeting to commission a nationwide review of theatre for young people. Theatre Board Manager John Baylis emphasises that there is no connection between the discussion paper, the decision at that same September meeting not to fund two TYP companies in NSW, and the review. 'Not one member at that 2001 meeting where the Discussion paper was tabled was still on the Board by September 2002.' The review has been commissioned because, 'There have been

changes in the area of TYP over the past 10–15 years and the Board wants an overview of what the changes are and what's driving them.' This article takes the three elements of the loss of funding for two TYP companies, the provocative McLean/Richer paper, and the nationwide review of TYP, and uses them to open up debate about the challenges facing the TYP sector.

There have many changes in TYP in NSW in particular. While receiving project funding in 2001, REM Theatre lost Australia Council triennial funding in that year, and now Theatre of Image (Sydney) has lost their Australia Council funding. Freewheels (Newcastle) has had its federal funding halved, and was dealt the double blow of a reduced grant from the NSW Ministry of Arts in 2002. In fact the discussion paper points out that the Australia Council granted \$600,000 less to TYP in the financial year 1999/2000 than in 1989/1990.

What does the loss of triennial funding mean for Theatre of Image's program in 2003? 'We can't go to places like Orange, Wollongong, Gosford – so 30,000 children will just miss out, because we can't take the risk. What we gave them was the full theatre experience, but they won't have access to that now', says Artistic Director Kim Carpenter. Theatre of Image is frustrated by what they regard as a flawed process in the last funding round. Kim Carpenter explains that, 'The Australia Council are a statutory body giving out money, so they have to have a system that works time after time. At the Board meeting where the decision was taken not to fund Theatre of Image, there

were only four out of seven Board members present. In other situations where that was the case you wouldn't go ahead with the meeting.' Kim also points out that no-one at the meeting had seen an entire Theatre of Image show, only video excerpts and two ten-minute excerpts at the Arts Market. 'It's the work that tells you – a living picture speaks louder than words. Seeing first-hand how a show compels a young audience is the real test.'

Freewheels have experienced similar confusion in their dealings with both state and federal funding bodies. General Manager Vicki Newman tells the story of their struggle to keep community and funding bodies happy, while staying true to the vision of the company and its goals:

'In June 2000 the company had a dramatically reduced presence in Hunter schools. For example, in 2000 we performed to only 6,000 students in the Hunter and 7,000 in Queensland, and a market survey of Hunter schools indicated that the company was not offering product suitable for their needs. One of our performance goals was to regain the confidence of the local market place. By the end of 2002 the company had tripled its local audience.' Freewheels' application to the NSW Ministry this year proposed a four-strand program which incorporated in-theatre projects, community projects, schools touring and youth projects. 'This was not anything new for the company as we had always worked this type of model. What was new was the company's commitment to undertake a four-strand program annually. The result of this funding application was a \$40,000 reduction in our funding.'

In response to the criticism and cuts by the NSW Ministry of Arts, the company's applications for funding for 2003 'reflected a scaled down program, with different models and research projects, in

accordance with what we believed the NSW Ministry's desire was for the company's future. This program was also submitted to the Australia Council. Their response to this application was a cut of \$73,000 and a statement, made by a project officer during a phone conversation, that we needed to undergo "radical fundamental change".

Freewheels were aware of the need for change in the style and content of their work. The 2003 applications to both funding bodies discussed the desire of the company for 'diversity in our theatre practice and longer, more diverse development of new work in order to move beyond the linear narrative form' that had been the basis of the company's work to date.

Vicki Newman says that 'Freewheels had no warning with regard to the funding cut – although we had, I believe, a very good and open relationship with our Australia Council project officer. After a visit with a Theatre Board member prior to the funding round he suggested that we needed to emphasise the company's relative isolation. We did, and in our notification letter the Theatre Board expressed their appreciation regarding the rationale of our relative isolation, however, they felt we should look at our practice in a national context of theatre for young people.' So, confusion, difficulty, a company trying to please everyone, and at the heart of it, not really any more enlightened as to why they have fallen out of favour.

Is the request for innovation, community relevance, and an articulated sense of the work in a national context too much to ask of a regional company that provides drama workshops, shows for young people, schools performances and site-specific community work? Most arts workers in small to medium companies work by the skin of their teeth, inventing the rationale and the philosophy as it emerges out of their practice. Isn't the relationship between theory and practice a lived, experiential thing? Perhaps developing a more considered relationship between theory and practice relies on companies having greater resources so that 'time out' can be taken for research, development and review of their own practice.

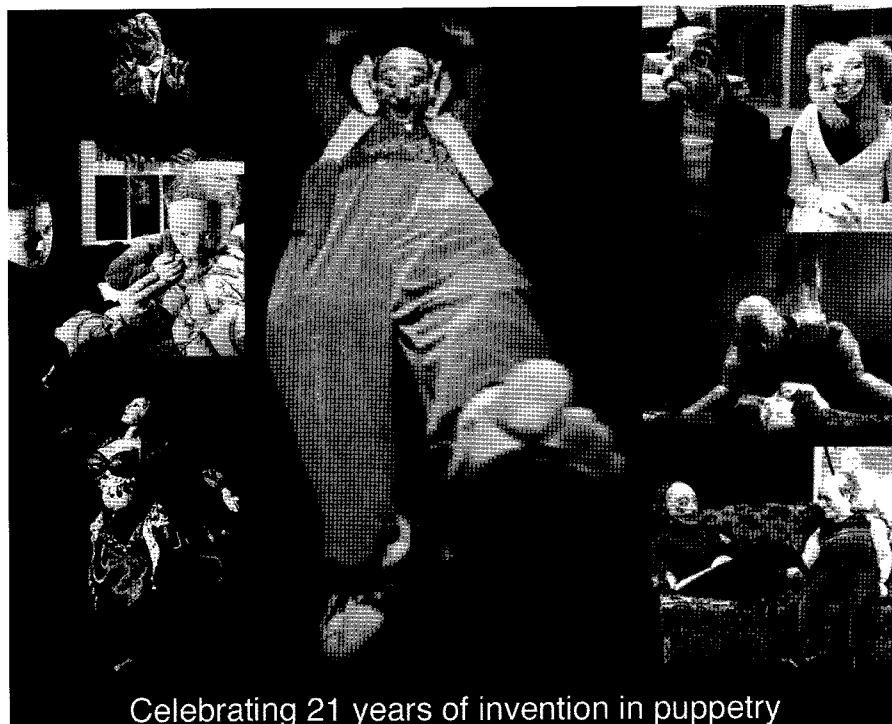
Jennifer Nicholls (Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University) believes that it is 'devastating' for the sector to have lost so much funding from TYP. 'Freewheels was wanting to change its terms of reference, but that put its funding in jeopardy. They have been around for twenty years, you'd think if a company wanted to diversify, you'd assume they knew their community and

let them do it.' Like others I spoke to for this article, she comments on the lack of coherent policy on the part of government about Children's Theatre. She says, 'Funding does have an impact in driving those changes – companies like that are dependent on federal funding. There is an expectation that federal and state funding bodies will support the work. Jaguar is one of the sponsors of the STC, but children's theatre can't find that kind of sponsorship.'

John Baylis insists that the Theatre Board is not driving the changes in the sector, and that 'the Board collectively has no preconceived opinions, but responds to applications against the published criteria'. And herein lies part of the problem/challenge for TYP, in that it covers a broad range of work for 0–26 year olds, yet must be assessed by the same funding criteria. Cate Fowler, Artistic Director of Windmill Theatre, believes 'one of the greatest challenges facing young people's theatre is defining what it is. I believe the term "young people" should comprise children (0–12) and youth (12–26).' She goes on to stress the difficulty inherent in a system where 'any organisation working with or targeting audiences under 26 is competing for the same funding pool. Where are the parameters and guidelines?' Kim Carpenter believes that theatre for children needs to be looked at independently of youth theatre, 'which is

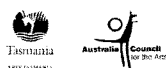
a part of the sector that has had a lot of review and resources'. Cate Fowler believes that, 'Unless this differentiation is made then it is impossible to review the sector in any meaningful way.'

For Kim Carpenter, 'When you put work up for funding against youth theatre projects, you are immediately vulnerable because, unless you have representation from the sector, you are dealing with adult sensibilities'. The qualities he looks for in artists who create work for children are 'a sense of the child in them, and a playful quality. John Olsen and Michael Leunig are artists who have this quality. You can be very sophisticated in your ideas and can make social and political comments within the work, if it's cast within a playful aesthetic.' He concedes that this view is 'not particularly fashionable in theatre at the moment, because it's not "edgy", it's not "innovative"'. Kim Carpenter believes that the concept of 'innovation' is highly personal, and yet 'it's in the Australia Council documents all the time at the moment. Yet when you ask them what they mean by "new", and "innovative", it all falls apart and ends up coming down to a personal view.' The Australia Council handbook defines 'innovation' as 'being intensely attuned to contemporary life to the extent that it affects the work that you make and the way you make work. It means not relying on established ideas and forms.'



Celebrating 21 years of invention in puppetry

photos clockwise from left: Eddie Safarik, Eddie Safarik, Glenn Dickson, Noeline Robinson, Eddie Safarik, Eddie Safarik



Terrapin Theatre
77 Salamanca Place
Hobart Tas 7004
Ph 03-6223 6834
www.terrapiin.org.au

Vicki Newman also believes 'consideration needs to be given to exactly what is – and who decides what is – innovation. I think it's very easy to sit in a capital city and judge what is good for a community with no background or understanding of that community. Credit needs to be given to the practitioners who work in specific regions – after all they are the ones that are in touch with the community. Innovation is a relative concept; what's innovative for one is old hat for another. One of the best quotes I ever heard was, "F•••, a play's innovative when you're six!"' According to Kim Carpenter, 'If we were to take on board some of these "edgy and innovative" qualities that are spoken about, it would be deemed to be reprehensible and insensitive to the audience'.

Susan Richer, AD of Queensland's Out of the Box Festival (and co-author of the discussion paper quoted above), speaks about a slump in the quality and quantity of children's theatre. 'I still see work that is fairly traditional, sanitised and didactic, with the page-to-stage model a tried and tested formula.' She believes that 'we are mature enough as a sector to move away from it. Out of the Box has invested instead in creative development, encouraging local artists whose work we consider to be of relevance to children to work with us to make new, innovative work.' The festival consults heavily with schools, parents and audience 'to develop a festival that is meaningful'. She says

that a nationwide review is 'necessary and important. If you compare Australian practice to Denmark and Sweden then we are behind the eight ball, particularly with resources and funding.' She is fervent that 'we need to look at our construction of childhood before we look at anything else. The deep thinking process that is permissible in adult theatre is not allowed in children's theatre.' Susan applauds the work of TYP companies who have 'engaged with pushing form, and are connecting with popular culture, as well as having a clear philosophical framework, and a mission to connect with different groups in the community'.

So where is TYP headed, and what are the challenges facing artists who work in the field? Kim Carpenter is concerned about TYP in Sydney in particular: 'Thirty-three percent of Australia's children live here, and yet our Opera House doesn't set a benchmark for shows for children. When they get a gap, they get something cheap, or that's already been paid for by Playing Australia. In WA you have Barking Gecko, Spare Parts Puppet Theatre and the Awesome Festival all in a state with a smaller population, and then in NSW you have Theatre of Image hanging on, REM de-funded, Freewheels struggling, and the Opera House doing a few things. There is no equity, no benchmarks.' Jennifer Nicholls points out that, 'In NSW primary schools there is a new Key Learning Area called Creative Arts, which covers the four areas of Drama, Music, Visual Arts and Dance. It has been in the pipeline for 10–12 years and is now being implemented. One of the areas in the syllabus is "appreciating drama", and children's theatre is not going to be there in NSW to support that area of study. When teachers and parents want their children to see good quality theatre what will they take them to see? "Disney on Ice"? I don't think so!'

The Board of Youth Performing Arts Australia (YPAA) hopes that the review will lead to policies that 'ensure this sector is appropriately resourced and recognised. It is essential that investment into this sector be improved to enable development of a greater volume of quality work for children and young people in Australia.' Kim Carpenter thinks the review will be a good thing, if its terms of reference are clear. 'In terms of defining goals and objectives of a review, the outcome needs to be clearly defined, or you end up with "file fodder". The Saatchi and Saatchi review "Australians and the Arts" got very specific feedback from teachers, but they [the Australia Council] have got to act upon it.' Vicki Freeman says 'a nationwide review of Theatre for Young People will be very informative, particularly in highlighting the diverse

range of work that is undertaken with minimal funding'.

So why do artists in the TYP sector keep making work for young people and children? What are the qualities that matter? Cate Fowler believes that 'when an audience engages with the performance people's lives are changed and transformed. People find themselves in a special and charmed space.' She says, 'Sharing a visit to the theatre is a bonding time which encourages children and families to discuss the experience and make sense of what they have seen. This reflection helps people to make sense of their own lives.' Kim Carpenter speaks about his desire to make work that asks 'Who are we? What are we? Why are we here? And what's that in the sky above us?' He enjoys telling stories 'by other means, with music and image, suggestion, rather than statements'. The McLean/Richer discussion paper critiques the focus placed on children and young people as 'future audiences' and questions the way 'society at large often positions children and young people as "future somethings" rather than "current somethings"'. The paper goes on to discuss via its 'Four Provocations' the ways in which the TYP sector might seek to engage with their audience, and find their way to a deeper understanding of why they are making work for young people. 'Theatre can assist young people to navigate the contemporary post-modern world; a world of feelings not encountered in skills-based education.'

It seems that everyone is agrees on the importance of the dynamic aesthetic education that theatre for children and young people can provide. The relationship between theory and practice, between guidelines and visions is vexed. But the expectation is that free and frank dialogue between funding bodies and artists could be possible one day. It is important that we can go into a room with our funding body representatives and talk about 'the work'. Certainly one hopes that the nationwide review of Theatre for Young People will lead to some tough, honest dialogue between funding bodies and artists, and to the support and creation of work for young people and children that proudly takes its place as a crucial artform in the Australian cultural landscape.

JANE WOOLLARD

The discussion paper referred to in this article, 'Theatre for Young People in Australia' by Judith McLean and Susan Richer, will be published in full in the next issue of Lowdown.



www.carclew.com.au

There's stacks of information online about great youth arts projects: Off The Couch, Arts Factory, Art of Jazz, DVFM, Active8arts, Indigenous projects, Playfull, Lowdown Magazine, Odeon Theatre and much more...

News and Events - The easiest way to see what's happening now in youth arts.

Online Mailing List - Be kept up to date on all things Carclew! Register now.

CHECK IT OUT

carclew SAYAB Australian Youth Arts Association ARTSA Positive minds attract GROUNDHOG