



# Towards the Final Stretch

## *The last days of the Australia Council Youth Panel*

**In this issue, Youth Performing Arts Australia (YPAA) presents the fourth paper in the lead-up to the YPAA National Conference at the Sydney Opera House in October. Ruth Osborne, Ryk Goddard, Tony Le Nguyen and Jane Neville respond to an article prepared on behalf of Australia Council Youth Panel members by Lana Gishkariany and Karen Byrant. Lana and Karen reflect upon the achievements of the Panel, future aspirations and the challenges meeting governments and the youth and broader arts sector.**

With increased access to vast amounts of information, young people are actively gaining diverse knowledge and skills to initiate their own projects. Forming strategic alliances, interacting with many cultures and 'thinking global to act local' are a few crucial elements that influence the future development of young people's creative projects. Therefore it is important that government bodies and the broader arts and youth arts sector embrace external environmental changes to support and value young people as artists.

So how can we achieve this, taking into account young people's aesthetic learning experiences within dynamically changing yet supportive environments?

The Australia Council's Youth Panel is now heading towards the final stretch of its existence. Established in October 1999, the Panel has had an exciting yet challenging role of being let loose within the Council to 'articulate the needs of young people, to advocate for them, and to improve access for young people by bringing their informed ideas to Council'. (Youth and the Arts Framework, 1999). This has been a huge task and the Panel has attempted to raise a range of issues and offer suggestions to increase awareness about young people's participation in the arts, and embed long-term change in the way this is viewed and supported.

The Panel 'encourages free debate both inside and external to the Council to provide another doorway for policy ideas from the field'. One specific issue the Panel has identified through this journey is the significant role youth arts organisations play within the broader arts sector. With the review of small to medium sized performing arts companies currently being implemented, how can we, as bodies of government departments, arts agencies and youth arts organisations, collaboratively develop an ongoing critical dialogue to ensure support that resonates for young artists in the techno-savvy 21st century? And how can this support assist these artists to extend and transfer their skills to geographically distant, socially or financially disadvantaged young people as well?

During its time, the Panel has navigated the complexities of the Council as well as meeting with and listening to various youth arts practitioners across the nation. This has involved reading vast amounts of Australia Council material, reading existing state government youth cultural policies, reading material about current overseas youth arts trends, attending Australia Council policy and fund meetings and listening to people's concerns and issues. Whilst it is has not been possible to hear the voices of everyone across the nation, the Panel has identified that there are many complex issues that youth artsworkers and artists face both within and outside of existing youth arts organisations. These key issues include protocols for working with young people, dealing with social and personal issues raised through youth arts works, duty of care/pastoral care issues, training, recognition and remuneration for workers in the youth arts sector. These responsibilities impact on the qualitative work practices in youth performing arts and impact on industrial work conditions, safety and the perceived value of cultural work created with and by young people.

The Panel acknowledges the amount of work these companies do and the responsibilities that go hand in hand with such work. Along with these issues, it has also been recognised that there may be a perceived gap in acknowledging the specific needs of youth arts organisations on not only a Federal level with the Australia Council, but also across local and State/Territory government body agencies. Historically, the funding support for these companies

has been low, and like most small companies they are increasingly expected to achieve greater outcomes for the same amount of dollars.

To a certain extent, the breadth of youth arts work is not acknowledged or recognised, as human, material and financial resources continue to diminish. This has a major impact on companies that are having to cut back on programs and projects because funding levels are limited and harder to spread across their operational needs. As these companies are forced to cut back activities, there are further ripple effects, with lower profiles in the media, the inability to develop and implement effective marketing and audience development strategies, and the loss of opportunities to attract sponsorship and new members.

Whilst many of these problems are not specific to youth arts organisations, the impact cannot be ignored, particularly in light of the pressures brought to bear across all operational needs, due to the added duty of care responsibilities and training requirements which many of these (often under resourced) companies face. These foundational issues affect the entire artistic vision of a company to provide opportunities for young people to explore their creative interests and aesthetic experiences. Companies across the nation are also scrutinised at an increasingly complex level, with ongoing pressures at a State/Territory and Federal level to build financial reserves at a time when most are struggling to even maintain levels of operation, let alone have money to put aside.

In a climate where recognition of the need for the arts to engage with the community in more practical ways is beginning to occur, it is interesting to note that while youth arts activity has struggled to gain credibility in broader circles, it has been and remains a leader in community cultural development-focused work. Within the broader folio of various local, State/Territory and Federal government arts agencies, this work, which often embraces broad partnerships with non-arts sector organisations and networks, may not be perceived as valid professional artform practice.

The assessment of youth arts practice has long been a focus for debate, raising the question of how funding assessment processes can be dedicated not only to excellence in end product, but to an appreciation of innovation and development as a pathway to excellence. How can this assessment be valued in the broader arts industry without being judged purely against an adult arts organisation aesthetic of artistic excellence? To what extent are judgements based on a fossilised notion of youth arts that has been allowed to

remain at the expense of a contemporary one?

During the past months, a core group of Australia Council staff members have been working with the Panel to identify the needs of youth performing arts organisations and young artists. This process has been a small yet important stepping stone in addressing issues at a Federal level. This dialogue has been extremely beneficial in identifying within Council ways to develop long-term strategies regarding the involvement of young people in the arts.

Along with the challenges of current infrastructural needs for youth performing arts organisations, there is the ongoing need to embrace and support creative practices by young people which fall outside of the established networks. How can we, as youth arts organisations and youth artworkers, engage better with young people who naturally choose to use tools around them (such as computers, video cameras, bedroom animation and electronic music) to express their creativity? How can we engage and challenge traditional youth performing arts practice to support young people's contemporary understanding of performance within a culture of multi-sensory internet, Playstation and television experiences?

A recent article in *Lowdown's* June edition about four regional Queensland organisations demonstrated their flexibility in meeting the artistic needs of young people. The projects within these companies are diverse, ranging from cross-artform performances that may not include technology through to multimedia performance exhibitions. Most importantly, they provide an open environment for young people to actively create their own work within a supportive space. Such relationships between individual artists and organisations have the potential to play a vital role in the future support and development of new forms of young people's arts practice.

As globalisation and technology change the way we communicate and how we create, it may be these spaces that will be crucial in the ongoing support and development of young people as artists. This may also impact on how young people will form alliances to collaborate and actively exchange skills and knowledge with other artists regardless of geographical distance.

Youth performing arts organisations are in an exciting position of supporting new forms of work and performance outcomes with and by young artists. However, this can only be achieved through ongoing critical dialogue, negotiation and action between local, State/Territory and government agencies in collaboration with the broader arts and youth arts sector. The Panel hopes that its role has been at

least a small step in facilitating this process, and looks forward to the inspirational, long-term collaborations and exchanges between these sectors to support, celebrate, validate and recognise young people's aesthetic experiences and rich contribution to Australia's diverse culture.

**LANA GISHKARIANY  
AND KAREN BRYANT**

*Australia Council Youth Panel members*

## **WHERE IS THE ACTION?**

Words, words, words! Where is the action!

In the almost two years that the Youth Panel has run there have been many meetings, much reading, well worded info sheets and a general educating of some excellent young committed artists. Does this mean the support and status of youth arts has improved?

For those of us who have worked in the youth arts sector for many years there is significant frustration about the time, money and effort it has taken to arrive at this point. The years of reviews, the work on the Youth and the Arts Framework, the commitment of \$700,000 to youth arts, the Promote and Value the Arts Strategy (which identified the need to reach young people as a priority) all seem to recognise the value of youth arts in the larger arts picture. Has this led to securing the work of youth arts organisations? Are youth artworkers receiving the respect they deserve?

The Youth Panel has identified the key issues and has been working closely with the Australia Council staff. They say 'this process has been a small yet important stepping stone in addressing issues at a Federal level'. This is not good enough! The process should be a lot further along by now. In the very expensive and glossy Youth and the Arts Framework we were told that youth was a priority for the next two years. This is now over, so where is the action?

Specifically in the area of dance there has been a drop in the support for youth. The biennial Australian Youth Dance Festival has not received funding even though there is tremendous interest across Australia and internationally for this wonderful initiative. The oh so few established youth dance companies with long and excellent histories still compete with each other for the smallest project grants (never a yearly program), and feel lucky to receive support every two or three years. There is no recognition of track record or best practice. Does the Dance Panel really understand the value of such companies in the broader dance scene for the future of dance?

I would like to congratulate the Youth Panel for their energy and commitment and I watch and wait to see if the

Australia Council can finally move forward to some positive action.

**RUTH OSBORNE**

*Manager, Youth Practices  
The Australian Choreographic Centre*

**CLAIMING POWER AS  
ART MAKERS**

The role of youth theatre companies as training providers, creators of new work and creators of platforms for events led by young people across artforms is a huge brief. People who want skills may not want to do cutting edge cross artform work. People who want to do cutting edge work may need a platform, not classes. There is already a recognition in Australia of the difference between theatre for young people and youth theatre activities. Increasing sophistication in definitions will allow resources to be targeted more strategically.

At STC we aren't funded to run a youth theatre company. With no contemporary youth theatre in town, we endeavour to fill that role without compromising our infrastructure. At the moment we are focusing on creating platforms that challenge young people to perform and train and present more often and to be more savvy about using existing resources to generate their own work. Strategies include a six month program for emerging artists that combines skills development and theatre making exercises that insists participants value their work by committing time and thought to each activity. We aim to create a new generation of young artists who initiate their own projects as teachers, creators and performers. We also target a regional area each year for workshops that focus on skills from installation to storytelling. The medium is less important than conveying methods of making meaning. Once the artists leave it is vital participants can continue to pursue the work.

Australia gets great value out of its youth theatre companies. As long as companies continue to support young people in leading their own work, the work will be relevant. The challenge is how the companies can work together to make the wider community appreciate the work that is already happening and to challenge young people to claim their own power as art makers in whatever media they choose.

**RYK GODDARD**

*Artistic Director  
Salamanca Theatre Company*

**RECOGNISING THE  
NEEDS OF A DIVERSE  
SOCIETY**

I would like to respond to the OzCo Youth Arts Panel article by talking about Vietnamese Youth Media's work and its relationship with the youth arts sector.

Vietnamese Youth Media was founded seven years ago by myself, with the support of the Footscray Community Arts Centre, to provide a voice and a space for young Vietnamese-Australians to make arts.

When people ask me, 'What is Vietnamese Youth Media?', I tell them that we are a cultural terrorist organisation. Why cultural terrorism? I think the answer to this question is very much the same as any other act of terrorism. For me there is an element of anger, frustration and desperation toward the arts and media in Australia about the lack of recognition and inclusion of young people in mainstream work.

Critical dialogue is very important when working with young people because young people grow and change like us adults. We must never assume we know young people just because we work with one group of young people. One thing that I am very conscious about when working with young people is to understand the effects and outcomes of each and every project that I developed. I often ask myself am I teaching young people something or am I just brainwashing them. When I inject this drug called the arts into young people and then they get addicted to it, what do I do then? Do I send them back onto the street and work with another group of young people or what?

I agree with Lana Gishkariany's and Karen Bryant's article on many points with regard to ongoing critical dialogue. But this dialogue must take into consideration the issues of cultural diversity and its relationship to space and artform. In my experience, when the word 'youth' is used to define Australian youth, often this word means 'Anglo Australian youth' and their cultural expressions.

Television programs such as 'Neighbours' or 'Home and Away' only show young Australians as white and Anglo-Saxon. When we turn to radio stations such as JJJ, the so-called Australian youth broadcaster, it's the same problem again. How does mainstream or even self-proclaimed alternate media recognise cultural diversity? How does it recognise the different cultural, language and religious needs of our diverse society? Why would young Vietnamese-Australians listen, watch or engage with media when it doesn't include them? What is in it for them?

**TONY LE NGUYEN**

*Executive Producer  
Vietnamese Youth Media*

**A DELICATE AND  
VARIED BALANCE**

It is affirming to witness the work of young people gaining substantial recognition in the world. Sociologically,

the population of money holding, decision-making adults have progressively begun to recognise the inherent value of young people – not only as learners but also as wise and innovative teachers. They are often inventors with creative problem solving skills and a fresh outlook on the world in which we live. As the article clearly demonstrates, we are no longer trying to gain rights for the young people of Australia or those making work for this demographic, but rather concentrating our efforts on defining and adding appropriate weights to these rights. People belonging to the 'young people bracket' are a mixed bunch of trained and un-trained, amateur and professional, experienced and inexperienced creative individuals needing a delicate and varied balance of support and freedom. It is a true challenge to attach appropriate funding categories, support networks and advisory panels to represent and support such a varied bunch. However, as the article clearly demonstrates, it is absolutely important that we attempt to do so.

In 1997 the Western Australia Young People and the Arts Policy was launched, leading to significant structural changes within ArtsWA. A Young People & the Arts Project Officer position was created and a Young People and the Arts Assessment Panel appointed to manage a dedicated pool of funds. ArtsWA has also initiated the Youth Arts Network to provide further support, and the WA YPAA Network Group can be tapped into for a state, national and global perspective of local practice. With such ongoing structures in place in Western Australia, artists engaged in work for, by and with youth can be confident that a balance of people of all ages are working together to make their particular needs and concerns heard. It would be disappointing therefore, to let the Australia Council Youth Panel 'head towards the final stretch of its existence'. It is important for a mechanism to exist whereby young people's voices can be heard at all levels of Council.

The article also notes that diminishing resources of arts organisations reduce their capacity to support young artists and/or make quality work for young people. In WA, companies have worked hard to overcome these difficulties. They continue to attract a broad range of people from the community and offer a vibrant and creative forum for the exchange and presentation of new ideas. It is hoped that this vital contribution of companies that work with young people will be recognised and supported commensurate to their value to our artistic future.

**JANE NEVILLE**

*WA Young People in the Arts Panel  
Buzz Dance Theatre Dancer/Teacher  
YPAA WA Deputy*