

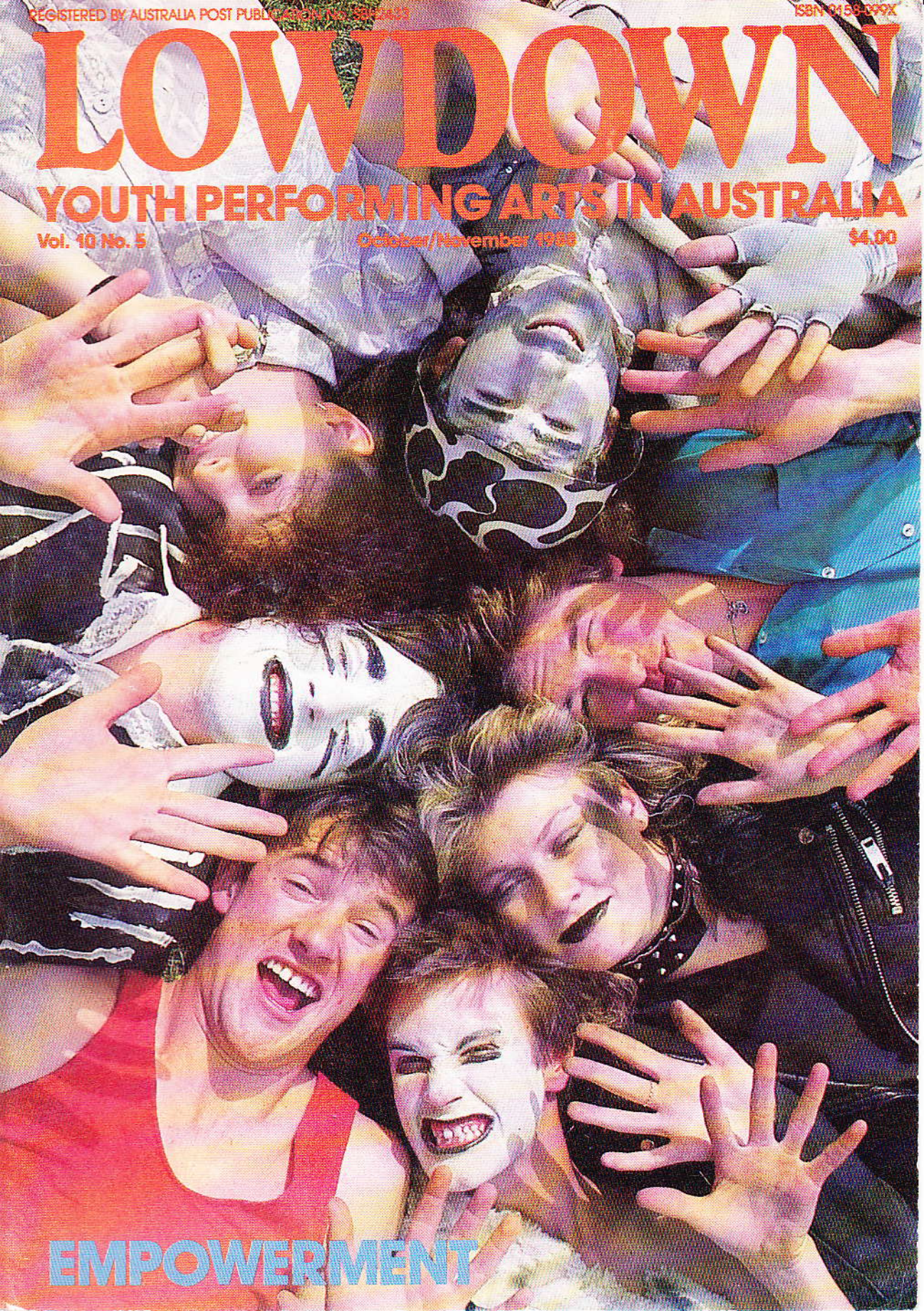
LOWDOWN

YOUTH PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

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EMPOWERMENT

LAST BASTION OF LIBERALISM?

YOUTH THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA BY IAN CHANCE

THE CRITICAL broad view of Australian theatre today sees major companies bowing low to the pressures of box-office popularity, fringe theatres felled by funding cuts and a seemingly concomitant loss of will, community theatres hunkering down under critical fire to produce more 'professional' work, and TIE apparently having reached a creative plateau and a marketing crisis simultaneously. Through a gloom of cultural pragmatism, however, one light glimmers still. Thanks be that it is the torch held by our youth.

For some ten years now, through

the heady days of this country's 'cultural renaissance', the oft maligned and always under resourced youth theatres have been steadily growing in numbers, in the talent of their membership and the skills of their directors and tutors. Now the youth theatre movement seems to have reached a kind of critical mass with new and reinvigorated groups bursting out all across the country. From Nhulunbuy at the Very 'Top End' to Subiaco in the suburbs of the West, from the orange groves of the Riverland to the genteel avenues of South Yarra, youth theatres are

looking about to recognise each other, to draw on each other's strengths and experience.

More and more we find first generation youth theatre members, having completed advanced theatre training, returning to the fold to nurture the next generation. And we find highly skilled theatre workers, disillusioned with foyer culture and craving a cutting edge, prepared to dedicate their craft at discount to the fresh enthusiasms and outspoken creativity of young people.

For youth theatre is a movement at whose nexus is the development of confident socialisation and an independent voice in all its participants. This comes about as the natural outcome of a style which focuses on the 'process' of developing dramatic communication skills rather than on the 'product' of staging them. Through their growing awareness young people soon realise their own power within this process and are quick to demand a say in it — and such demands cannot be denied without negating the entire experience.

It is in this central issue that contemporary youth theatres break with the older traditions of children's theatre in schools or community pro/am theatres. Such programs tend to hold to the old educational values of children as 'the empty vessel' and subject their charges to the typical intensive six week rehearsal period, in, on and out — with no time for the luxuries of questioning, analysis or self expression. In such product oriented organisation (typical also of most adult theatre, amateur and professional) the aims are determined before participants even arrive, from then on 'the job is there to be done' and all personal needs and considerations must bow before it.

"In today's increasingly conserva-

"WE DO HAVE A COMPARATIVELY LIBERAL EDUCATION TRADITION IN THIS COUNTRY. WE'RE NOT AFRAID OF YOUNG PEOPLE BEING INDEPENDENT AND THINKING INDEPENDENTLY. THERE SEEMS TO BE VERY LITTLE TRADITION OF YOUTH DOING THINGS FOR THEMSELVES IN EUROPE FOR EXAMPLE..."

MICHAEL DONEMAN LA BOITE YOUTH THEATRE



SI Martins Youth Arts Centre 'Off the Tracks'



tive cultural environment youth theatres might well be considered as a last bastion of liberalism," says Michael Doneman, artistic director of Brisbane's La Boite Youth Theatre.

Acting Youth Projects Officer for the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council, Des James, agrees: "Yes, I tend to subscribe to the theory of youth theatres as the new independent voice," he says, "It's certainly where the action is at the moment."

To avoid possible misunderstandings it should be stressed that youth theatres speak with the natural voice of youthful concern, theirs is not a learned radicalism nor a didactic impressed by propagandist teachers. Clearly, the majority of tutors and directors in youth theatre see their primary roles as facilitators encouraging confidence in self expression, and as teachers providing only the necessary skills for the dramatic enactment of this expression.

La Boite director Michael

Doneman expresses the youth theatre equation this way; "The fact that process orientation involves constant questioning, doubting and testing means that young people start to think analytically about what they are involved in rather than just having fun — important as that is, it just doesn't work if they're not having fun — they start to want to have more say.

"Another interesting thing happens, too. It's that one comes to see the kids not so much as students but as artists in their own right, or at least as a bit of both. And as soon as we start to think of young people as artists in their own right then we start to come up against concepts such as emancipation, empowerment — all those great words that get bandied about so often.

"Cliched as they may seem that's what has happened at La Boite. The young people not only tell us what they want to do plays about, but also make suggestions about the way that we structure the process, the work-



Youth Theatre Company (Perth) 'Outsiders'

shops, pre-production, rehearsals etc.

The dozens of youth theatres across the country present a full spectrum of styles. Some are disparagingly described as "little NIDA's", auditioning casts and members and charging quite respectable fees. Such groups tend to place emphasis on the theatre training aspect of youth theatre and proudly point to the number of their ex-members who have entered the profession. It has been suggested that such training bias can lead to a form of institutionalisation which denies participants a real say in the process and content of their work.

At the other end of the spectrum are those youth theatres derided as "junior drama social clubs", whose lack of adequate professional input may deny the development of substantial theatre skills to participants, but whose social developmental role can be considerable. Between these extremes lie those youth theatres one would hope are in the majority, those who have balanced the demands of process and performance, skills training and socialisation.

But whatever the style of an individual youth theatre one can be sure that there is room for all in the varied environments of contemporary Australian society and that the style of each group is most likely a direct response to the expectations



Youth Theatre 2000 'Godspell'

"ONE COMES TO SEE THE KIDS NOT SO MUCH AS STUDENTS BUT AS ARTISTS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT, OR AT LEAST AS A BIT OF BOTH... THEN WE START TO COME UP AGAINST CONCEPTS SUCH AS EMANCIPATION, EMPOWERMENT..."

MICHAEL DONEMAN



Australian Theatre For Young People 'Burger Brain'

and needs of the young people it attracts.

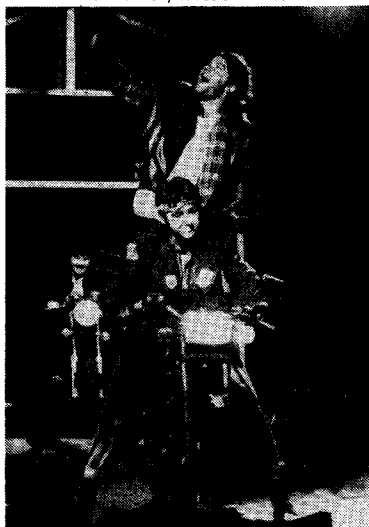
First impressions from talking to youth theatres around the country would seem to place some groups as far apart in style as they are in miles, but further questioning invariably revealed a strong commitment to the empowerment of their young members — regardless of the company's physical and philosophical distance from the seats of ideology in the major eastern cities.

AT THE GOVE Junior Theatre in Nhulunbuy, on the north eastern tip of Arnhem Land, the group's only adult worker (and a volunteer at that) their co-ordinator, Lorraine Edwards, had never heard of the Australia Council. Established for over ten years under the umbrella of the Gove Senior Theatre, the Junior Theatre aims to provide kids with "a bit of culture", and gives less sports-minded youngsters the opportunity of peer group recognition outside the arena. Like most remote mining towns, Gove's community life tends

to be centred on the daring-do of the sports fields.

With the assistance of \$500 from the Bicentennial Committee, the Gove Junior Theatre has just completed a short season of three locally written one-act plays under the title *Horses to Holdens, Corned*

FACT Theatre 'The Merry Wives of Windsor'



Beef to Spaghetti. It was locally acclaimed and attracted over 100 people to each of its three performances. Previously the group has lent its energies to such classics as *Cinderella* but also has a recognised community function in appearing at the opening of new stores and local celebrations.

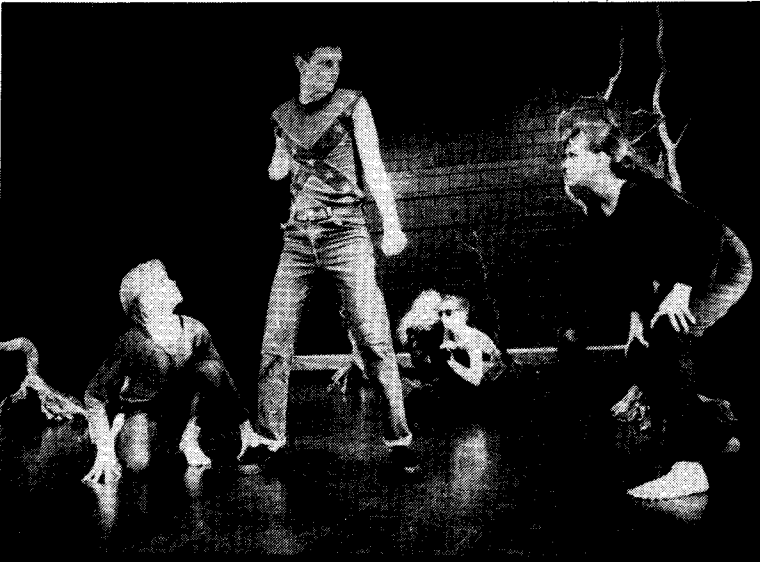
With only 25 members and distant from big-city theatre resources, a little professional assistance goes a long way in Gove. A recent Arts Council sponsored writer-in-residence at the local primary school soon found himself working nights with the Junior Theatre. "It was a wonderful eye-opener for us," says Lorraine. "He not only taught us about writing but his theatre experience was a great help to us in dozens of little ways."

NEARER to the centre of things, Canberra Youth Theatre is well-established with its own theatre, good technical resources and some 250 members. It has a history of presenting highly acclaimed, high

profile performances and has toured widely.

However, CYT's Artistic Director, Amanda Field, says; "We are not a theatre school and we are not training people to move into the profession. Though we certainly assist and encourage young people with a strong determination in this direction, our aim is to teach the fundamental elements of theatre, to understand the medium in terms live actors, live audience, use of space, content, form and so on."

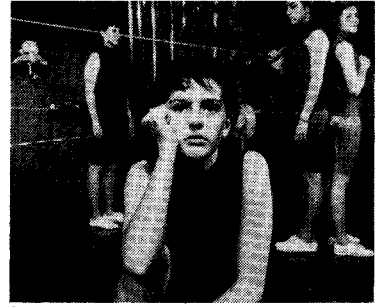
"Through teaching them how they can use theatre, young people learn to have confidence in expressing their opinions, attitudes and feelings relating to their concerns," Amanda says. This attitude is reflected up in Gove, too. "Socialisation and self-expression are every bit as important as theatre skills," says Lorraine Edwards. "Give our young people a chance to display their feelings and express themselves. And this is where they will do it, at Gove Junior Theatre."



Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre 'Black Rainbow'

SYDNEY's long-running Shopfront Theatre, set in the predominantly workers' suburb of Carlton, was established with the clear intention of youth emancipation, "to give kids a voice". It is run on democratic principles by a board of members and ex-members, each of whom is a shareholder in the Shopfront company which wholly owns the property and buildings in which it is housed.

"Many of the kids come here with stars in their eyes and dreams of becoming a Soap Star," says John du Feu, founding member of the world-travelled Dutch theatre company, Kiss, and Shopfront's artistic director since January this year. "However, their eventual gain is more strength and confidence in themselves and a highly educated interest in theatre. Kids, particularly 'difficult' creative kids, are told many discouraging things about themselves both at school and at home. Their involvement in Shopfront helps them to focus a little higher, to see



Canberra Youth Theatre 'Elastics'

more avenues and what their real possibilities might be," he says.

Shopfront's activities are based on the concept of 'playbuilding', a process of exploring group ideas with the aim of producing a performance work. "The initial push of playbuilding is to develop the character of the group, to discover commonalities of concern — what they are into," says John. "The first three or four weeks are generally pretty unsettled and can be highly charged but then the group starts to find character and their ideas start to get some spine. There can sometimes be more than one theme to a group but you can be sure that they will be very thoroughly explored."

Shopfront publishes a lot of material written by its members and has a unique style of bare-bones theatre. Its long-term members are highly motivated and it often seems that their whole world revolves around life within the group. One senses, however, that at an early stage they come to see themselves as highly committed individual artists, prepared to stand up for their own ideas against anyone.

Members of the company have recently performed their own multicultural play, *Do You Speak Ahklish?*, for Sydney's Carnivale and have also appeared at the Youth Theatres Festival organised by Elanora Youth Theatre at Narabeen

"THROUGH TEACHING THEM HOW THEY CAN USE
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THEIR CONCERNS"

AMANDA FIELD CANBERRA YOUTH THEATRE

Lakes — another example of the growing sense of community amongst youth theatres.

CLOSER to town, PACT Youth Theatre have just moved into their own generous premises, in an old factory in the inner Sydney suburb of Erskineville, after years of sharing space in downtown Sussex St. The comparatively high level of support from various State departments for their rebuilding project reflects both the long history of the group and the frequency of their appearances at community venues such as Darling Harbour and suburban shopping centres.

An experimental theatre group in the sixties, PACT first got involved with young people in 1974. Responding to a demand from young people for their own theatre, PACT made its first intake of 100 kids who workshopped and rehearsed *The Great Australian Do It Yourself Pantomime Kit* which they performed as four separate groups in the far corners of Sydney over the summer holidays.

One of the young participants in that 1974 experiment was Jenny Nicholls, then 14 and now a professional theatre director and the part-time artistic director of PACT Youth Theatre. "The formula remains much the same today," she says. "Young people's first contact with PACT is to learn a children's show during their first week in the summer recess and present it in the second. Since most kids are initially attracted to youth theatre through the desire to perform, we find that this suits their expectations and works quite well.

"Attendance is free and there are no auditions. The shows are devised in such a way that everyone supports each other in a character role, no stars, and the roles are rotated through rehearsal and performance too — everyone can play every part plus operate the lights and act as general assistant — and everyone has a good time."

After the initial children's show, PACT's members go back into workshops one night per week and at weekends. These workshops are not in specific skills, drama, voice etc., but are goal oriented toward performance. Skills are taught as they are needed for each show.

"Our philosophy is to allow young people to experience theatre

on many different levels," says Jennifer. "We expect kids to take away not only an appreciation and understanding of theatre but of all the fine arts, music, visual arts etc. Plus, it is a great opportunity for them to meet people from many different backgrounds. We attract kids from all backgrounds and from all over Sydney. Many come to us unsure of themselves and our major thrust is to develop confidence and self esteem and get them to recognise the potential in themselves."



2 Till 5 Youth Theatre "What Are Ya Nicole?"

This now familiar refrain was repeated by every youth theatre worker interviewed, always in terms of self-confidence, self-expression, scope, potential and . . . empowerment, in a word. Maybe there's a book somewhere?

In fact there are dozens of books, mostly in the educational field of drama development. Lorraine Edwards, in Gove, had told me that she used books from both the N.S.W. and W.A. drama curriculae. But one realises that there is more scope for personal development in youth theatres as compared with inside the institutionalised and often restrictive environment of the education system. It is an observation that has not escaped many ex-Speech and Drama teachers and graduates, particularly in Queensland.

"Surprising to some, the educational model in Queensland is quite progressive," says La Boite's Michael Doneman, himself an ex-teacher. "Drama subjects are firmly ensconced in schools here and provide good models of continuous

assessment, which I believe is very important in youth theatre.

"There are now dozens of youth theatres across the State and one of the most heartening aspects is their development out in the bush, in mining towns and agricultural centres. Typically, they are being led by strong, intelligent young women, often with a drama education background, who have had families and are now getting back into it. They are succeeding against all odds, usually without funding and often only get by with the small assistance of local Lions Clubs. In these places the youth theatres are the kids' only alternative recreational activity to sport, that or booze, drugs and car theft," says Michael.

One such youth theatre leader is Annamaria McGregor, co-ordinator of the Central Queensland Youth Theatre in the mining town of Glenden and, previously, founder of the Athena Youth Theatre in Mackay. Annamaria sees much of the impetus for the growth of youth theatres as coming from the expectations raised in young people by school drama programs. An ex-Speech and Drama teacher, she points to several others like herself who now work with youth theatres amongst those burgeoning in central and north Queensland; in Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville, Gladstone, Carmila, Moranbah, Cairns and Atherton.

"My traditional Speech and Drama values have moved a long way with my involvement in youth theatre, however," Annamaria says. She points to the influence of people like Brisbane community arts worker Pauline Peel, to the outspokenness engendered in young people by their involvement in youth theatre and to sheer momentum of change in Australians' cultural expectations as reasons for her own and her compatriots reconsidered attitudes.

Typical of the high level of exchange amongst youth theatres, Annamaria told me of her opinion of the ASSITEJ Conference as a moment of pivotal importance to the movement, and of a string of meetings and conferences, several quite regional in nature and including a Youth Theatres and Young Writers Conference happening in her own town which had attracted over 30 participants.

La Boite's Michael Doneman again: "Since the ASSITEJ Congress people have realised that the youth theatre movement in Australia is really quite advanced. It came as something of a shock, particularly for those of us working in Queensland, because we believed Barry Humphries when he said 'Australia is the Brisbane of the world'. We are conditioned in that cultural cringe and feel that our work is always somehow second best or at best comparable with the Brits and Americans. And yet we are realising that the work that is going on here in youth theatres is amongst the leaders in the world.

"I think that part of this is because we do have a comparatively liberal education tradition in this country. We're not afraid of young people being independent and thinking independently. There seems to be very little tradition of youth doing things for themselves in Europe for example, with the possible exception of the Nordic countries."

DOWN SOUTH, in the timber town of Burnie at the top of Tasmania, Youth Theatre 2000 was established in response to the fact that this area has the highest youth unemployment in that State, and few outlets for young creativity. A production oriented company performing mainly youth musicals such as *Godspell* and *Grease*, Youth Theatre 2000 may be unique in that it can actually turn a profit — \$6,000 on its last production.

Started in 1983 as a CEP youth program called Ideas 2000, it was decided that the medium of theatre was a very good outlet for young people to learn to express themselves, develop communications skills and experience the self-disciplines and group disciplines required in such an undertaking. There followed an original musical, *My Mother was a J.O'K Fan*, which toured widely and very successfully around Tasmania in 1984.

Since then, renamed Youth Theatre 2000, the group has staged a



La Boite Youth Theatre *Disbelief*

new musical each year using professional directors and designers, workshopping theatre and music skills under the artistic direction (part time) of Noel Browne, a lecturer at VCA. The group's activities are run under the management of a Youth Programs Board, all under 25, and using volunteer members in all professional roles except that of coordinator. Its annual membership is around 200, mostly students and with a good proportion of unemployed youth, particularly in the volunteer roles.

Youth Theatre 2000 has now expanded its program to include holiday workshops and a Children's Theatre attracting some 40 members between 12 and 15 years of age. They have also organised a regular under-age disco which features cabaret acts from the core group. In all it appears to be a very active and successful Youth Community Arts Program with a broad scope.

BACK ON THE mainland, the main stage. One cannot talk about youth theatre in Australia without looking at what is probably the most thoroughly resourced organisation in the country — Melbourne's St Martins Youth Theatre, established by Helmut Bakitus in 1980.

St Martins are the managers of two fully professional theatres in South Yarra. They have a full-time staff of nine, not including tutors,



Central Queensland Youth Theatre Annamaria McGregor, Cultural Director (centre), with Bobby Cruise, Director, Rockhampton Youth Theatre at the Youth Theatre and Young Writers' Conference, Glenden.

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JENNIFER NICHOLLS PACT THEATRE

who include management, marketing and technical staff. Much of this personnel resource is necessary for the maintenance and operation of the theatres, which are frequently hired, and this load has often hindered as much as helped the essentially bootstrap operation of running a youth theatre program.

It has also lent a 'star quality' aura to membership of St Martins which, combined with its location in the mega-rich eastern suburbs, has often led to accusations of class bias and trendiness. Administrator, Fran Sylvester, is at pains to put these images to rest. She stresses that the wider recruiting campaigns of recent times mean that St Martins is "genuinely for everyone" — if at a modest cost.

"It is true that in the past our members have tended to be advantaged and articulate," Fran admits. "But better publicity and more and better trained staff to deal with enquiries from young people has meant that we have now achieved a much broader membership."

St Martins has around 500 members, about 180 of whom are "really active at any one time". It has a very well structured workshop program with four drama tutors and tutors in movement, voice, singing for actors, puppetry and comedy, as well as the availability of staff for workshops in theatre tech., marketing and management. The program provides a professional induction to theatre with graded workshops proceeding through one term each (2-3 hrs each 10 weeks) of basic, intermediate and advanced drama, after which members can go on to specialised workshops.

Each year St Martins presents five major productions, involving a total of around 100 members, and about 12 small-scale presentations of cabaret, one-off acts and the like. "We hope to provide a varied theatre exposure, in-depth training, a wide repertoire and plenty of opportunity for performance," says Fran.

St Martins has also started an outreach program of workshops in the suburbs. Currently it is running a small Basic Drama Workshop at Glen Waverley, with tutor James Buick of FM Live. Theatre, and with the success of this project is hoping to run further workshops in Sunshine and Coburg next year.

"Our aims are to provide access to the Arts for young people as participants and to stimulate enjoyment of the Arts as recreation," says Fran. "While our main role is educative, in theatre and performing skills, the secondary emphasis of personal development — gaining confidence, making young people more articulate, and making friends — is also very important."

Fran says that by desire of the membership next year's season features a more international flavour with more emphasis on the text. The program includes *Billy Club Puppets* by Lorca directed by Ariette Taylor, *Soft Cops* by Caryl Churchill, Brecht's *Arturo Ui*, and Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

St Martins Youth Theatre is currently the subject of a ministerial inquiry being conducted by Andrew Bleby and it seems highly likely that it will be combined with the Next

Wave Festival over the next twelve months in an effort to maximise use of its resources.

THE OLDEST youth theatre in Australia is said to be the Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP) in The Rocks area of Sydney city. More skills oriented than some, ATYP has auditions and fees and often draws on the talents of well-known actors, directors and theatre personalities to train and inspire its members to the highest goals of the dramatic arts.

ATYP has just completed a season of an exceptional youth theatre work at Sydney's Seymour Centre. Specially commissioned, *Burger Brain* was a tour de force with very high production values. Its young cast were selected by audition from right across the city and displayed extraordinary talents, including the discovery of "the voice of a nightingale from Blacktown".



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Sydney also has the Elanora Youth Theatre at Narrabeen, Powerhouse Y.T. at Liverpool, Addison Rd, Y.T. in Marrickville, Giono Tomasich working somewhere out in Broadmeadows — and undoubtedly more.

In South Australia the productions of the well established Unley Youth Theatre are widely known as a result of their inclusion in many Adelaide Fringe and Come Out Festivals. Performances under various directors over the past eight years, particularly with director Jo Fleming and Brigid Kitchin, have achieved a hallmark of innovative staging and creative handling of text. Such interesting work has continued with their artistic director in 1988, Grahame Gavin.

Another bright spot in the south is the work of the Bowden Brompton *Cirkidz*, a youth community arts project in a disadvantaged area which has created a pool of circus skills frequently drawn upon to delight crowds at various community events around Adelaide. The work of the Port Adelaide Youth Theatre is reviewed elsewhere in these pages.

Western Australia boasts at least three youth theatres in the Perth area, plus two down south, one each at Bunbury and Albany. Based in the Subiaco Theatre Centre, Youth Theatre Co is currently a section of the Education Ministry. Established in 1983 at the behest of the Perth Festival and the Education Ministry, Youth Theatre Co. has produced a major commissioned work each year and also creates work through the playbuilding process.

Youth Theatre Co. has around 50 members and employs up to ten tutors to work with them each year. Twenty-five of their members recently undertook a three week tour of North America (still a way to go

before they join Shopfront in the 'most travelled youth theatre' category), including a season at the Vancouver Youth Festival with their commissioned play *Outsiders* and their playbuilt work, *Sharmans, Charlatans and Actors*.

"*Outsiders* is a very beautiful movement piece about Australian identity," says Director Robin Pascoe, adding that the works were extremely well received, particularly by the more conservative American audiences for whom the style of youth theatre was something new.

In the limited space available here I have tried to provide a sampling of the variety of youth theatres in Australia. Of course these have been but a few, there are many more tastes available to the epicure among what must now be hundreds of youth theatres across the country.

NO REVIEW of youth theatre in Australia could be complete without looking at the attitudes of its principal funding conduit, the Performing Arts Board (PAB) of the Australia Council. Support for youth theatres through the Board now comes to \$350,000 p.a., excluding special project funding from the Community Cultural Development Unit (CCDU, the old Community Arts Board). This level of funding represents a five-fold increase in the last five years and is exceptional in that it is the only program that the PAB has supported as a community project.

In this the PAB seems to have taken the attitude that Youth Theatre is a genre in its own right, to be judged by its own standards. It is worth noting that if it was considered as 'amateur theatre', youth theatre could well fall outside the funding guidelines of the Board.

"The Australia Council recognises that young people should be able to express their own ideas in their own

forms; that children's theatre is adults performing to young people and that they equally need their own theatre forum in a creative sense," says long-time Youth Projects Officer, Mary Travers.

"We realise of course that young people don't have sufficiently developed skills in drama, lighting, direction etc. to put on the work themselves and so we aim to support their work through professional assistance," she says.

Acting Youth Projects Officer, Des James adds; "The broad category of youth theatre funding applications that we respond to are those which have a community and social base for their existence and where kids are given the opportunity to have their voices heard.

"There's another type of youth theatre that we get a lot of applications from that is outside the current guidelines of the Board. These are basically training grounds for young actors and we cannot respond to them except for some special projects. At this time the PAB policy is very much aimed at the empowerment of the voice of youth as opposed to the training of skills.

"However, while the criteria for selection are oriented toward cultural and social significance, the actual area of assistance is for professional help in developing necessary skills," Des concludes.

We'll end this article with an accolade. "If you are looking for a model youth theatre, look to Barney Langford's work with the 2 Til 5 Youth Theatre in Newcastle," says Mary Travers. "They are everything that you could hope for, good production values, clearly responsive to the voice of their members and they're having fun too!"

Well I tried but I couldn't get on to Barney, but what was the need? I got it straight from the horse's mouth! ●

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