

LOWDOWN

magazine

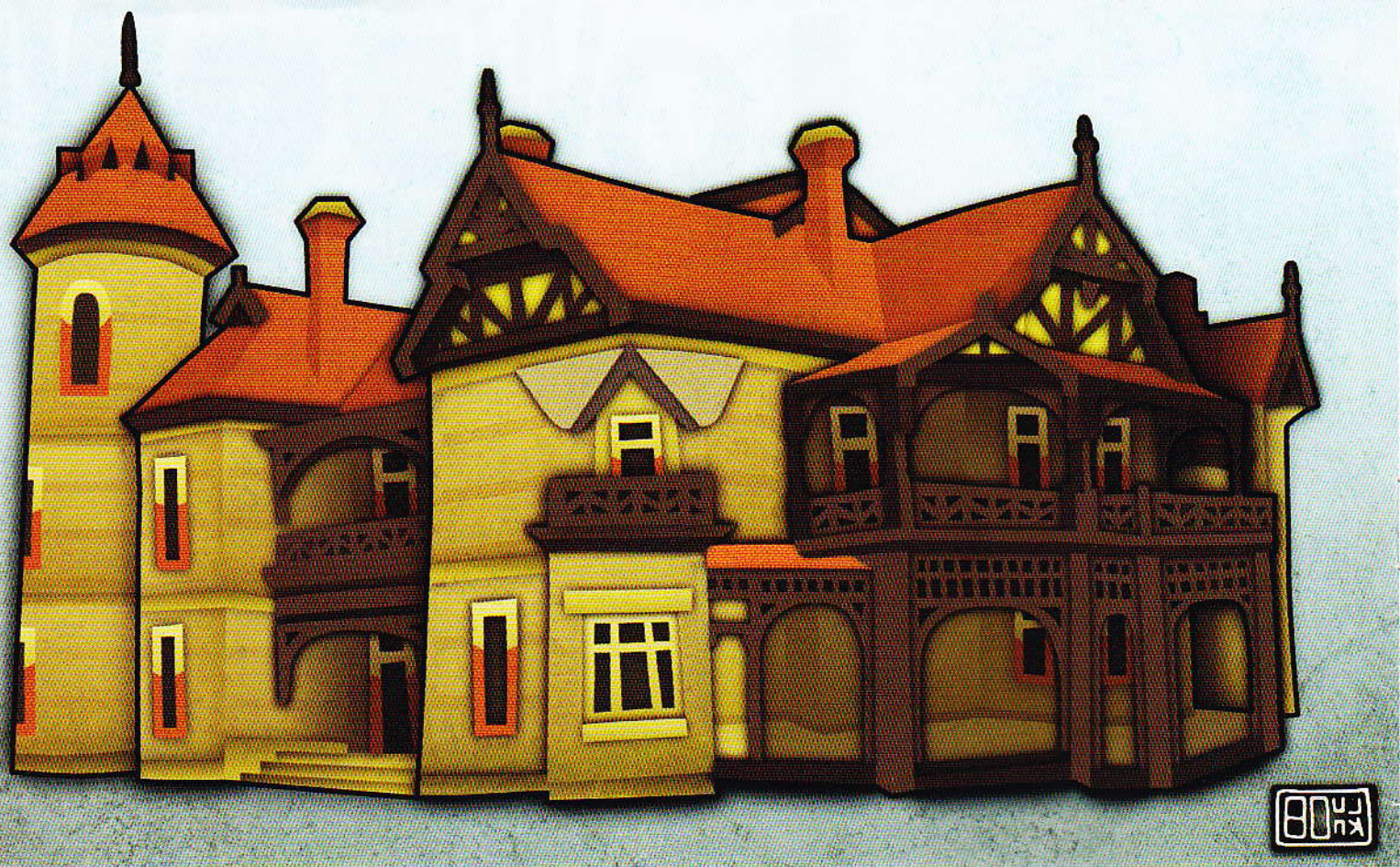


youth performing arts in australia

december 09 vol 31 no 6 12.50 inc gst

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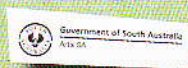
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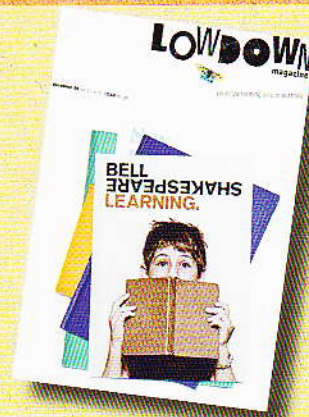
Bell Shakespeare

20 years ago John Bell started a Shakespeare company, devoted to giving all Australians access to the Bard's plays, regardless of geographic location. In 2010 Bell Shakespeare celebrates twenty years of fulfilling this ideal with a sensational year of Shakespeare, touring the biggest of theatres to the tiniest of remote schools.

With our anniversary comes a fresh new look. Just as Bell Shakespeare re-imagines the work of Shakespeare, approaching it from different perspectives in contemporary Australia, so his plays "hold a mirror up to nature" and reflect universal characters and concerns, 400 years on.

Our 2010 Learning programmes kick off with Shakespeare Battleplan, a half-day free Teacher Forum presented in every state and territory in Term 1 2010 supported by DEEWR. Later in the year our full-day Teacher Masterclass Shakespeare Weaponry will storm the country, as well as specialist masterclasses on Hamlet, Romeo And Juliet and Macbeth. King Lear will tour nationally commencing in Sydney in March and concluding in Perth in June. John Bell will play Lear in the evening performances and we introduce Keith Agius in the title role for the school performances. Andy Griffiths' 2008 smash-hit *Just Macbeth!* returns, playing at the Sydney Opera House in June-July, complete with marshmallows,

karaoke and garden gnomes! Touring nationally is Lee Lewis' retelling of *Twelfth Night*. Viola has lost her twin brother following a natural disaster but can't search for him until morning. How will she and her fellow survivors get through the night? They'll put on a show! The Regional Teacher Scholarship, Regional Performance Scholarship for budding young thespians, and Student Masterclasses are available in schools throughout the year. The ever-popular Actors At Work will tour schools across Australia presenting various one hour performances from the rigorous Hamlet Intensive to the joyous Love's Magic. For all info go to bellshakespeare.com.au/learning today.



The 2009 curtains prepare to draw to a close. Editors write their editorial finale for the year, the production team wave farewell to the final print issue as December 2009 *Lowdown* skips off to the printing press.

Writers pop their pen lids back on, marketing departments pant lightly and smile verily to themselves as 2010 programs are delivered. Send buttons are clicked to unleash the media release into the digital cosmos. Teachers sign the final report card with a sigh, students remove left over sandwiches from the school bag, actors hunker down to memorise the next exciting script, (unless of course you're doing Method and you begin to absorb your next personality). Managers slowly begin to unfurl their furrowed brow; administrators wearily sign off revised budgets and Hi5 shimmy and shake out those Christmas gigs with wide eyes and big, scary, shiny bright smiles. As one curtain closes another opens—and as the year comes to its end I find myself wondering if there is another one just around the corner! I bet Father Christmas five bucks that there is and I have some brilliant 2010 programs to prove it!

As many companies release their 2010 programs (some that are so outstanding I don't have enough adjectives to describe them), *Lowdown* hunkers down over the holiday season in preparation for its big online launch in February. It's been such an interesting journey transitioning from print medium to online delivery and the subscriber response has been encouraging.

Lowdown Online will officially launch in February 2010 and although we've been live and delivering quality content for the past six months I can honestly say it's only going to get better. There are those that will be sad, including one loyal reader who was concerned that she would no longer be able to, 'have a good read on the loo'. But hey, now's the time to grab a laptop, access even more than the print issue has delivered and keep your lap warm at the same time! It is the beginning of a very big adventure, a new era, and with much much more to give and I can't wait to deliver it.

For those venturing to Adelaide next February for the Adelaide Festival of the Arts or the Australian Performing Arts Market, make sure you stay tuned and join us for the launch scheduled for February 28, 2010. For those who can't make it, we'll keep you posted about the events, both on the site and through *Lowdown* subscriber updates. Without giving too much away *Lowdown* is gearing up for a fabulous and ground breaking year in 2010. We will continue to offer high quality, comprehensive coverage of work that is being produced for, by and with young people in Australia.

This December issue is short, sharp and shiny. Dramaturgy has always interested me and Saffron Benner, professional dramaturg and arts educator de-mystifies the practice. From across the Tasman, Stephen Blackburn from Wellington's Capital E, provides *Lowdown* readers with an overview of the youth arts sector in New Zealand. Stephen also puts out a call to action for the youth arts sector in Australia to connect with our New Zealand counterparts, and begin conversations about the ins and outs of making work for, by and with young people—a conversation will be facilitated on *Lowdown Online* in the features section.

Tracy Ellis covers Kim Carpenters Theatre of Image upcoming production of *The Book of Everything* and if the design elements are anything to go by this show looks to be a winner. Mark Radvan's interview with well known director and playwright, Wesley Enoch, gives us a unique insight into the world of creating theatre for young audiences. This article took me to another place and made me think about making work for children from an entirely different perspective—as my nephew likes to say, 'it's upside down Miss Jane'. Last but not least I encourage every reader to take in the reviews. Critique and review is on my list of discussion topics for 2010 but more on that, on-line, later on.

Lowdown Online will officially launch in February 2010 and although we've been live and delivering quality content for the past six months I can honestly say it's only going to get better.

Also of interest, in January 2010, four fabulous Australian companies head off to Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, USA, to join the International Performing Arts for Youth (IPAY) Showcase held from 20-23 January, 2010. According to IPAY organisers, it is the first time that four international works, all from one country have been accepted into the showcase. The annual showcase includes performances, exhibits, networking opportunities, and more recently a pre-conference seminar and attracts major companies, artists and programmers, who serve young audiences. Throughout the four-day event, professionals share resources and view performances of national and international performing artists who have been selected through a rigorous jury process conducted by an international selection committee.

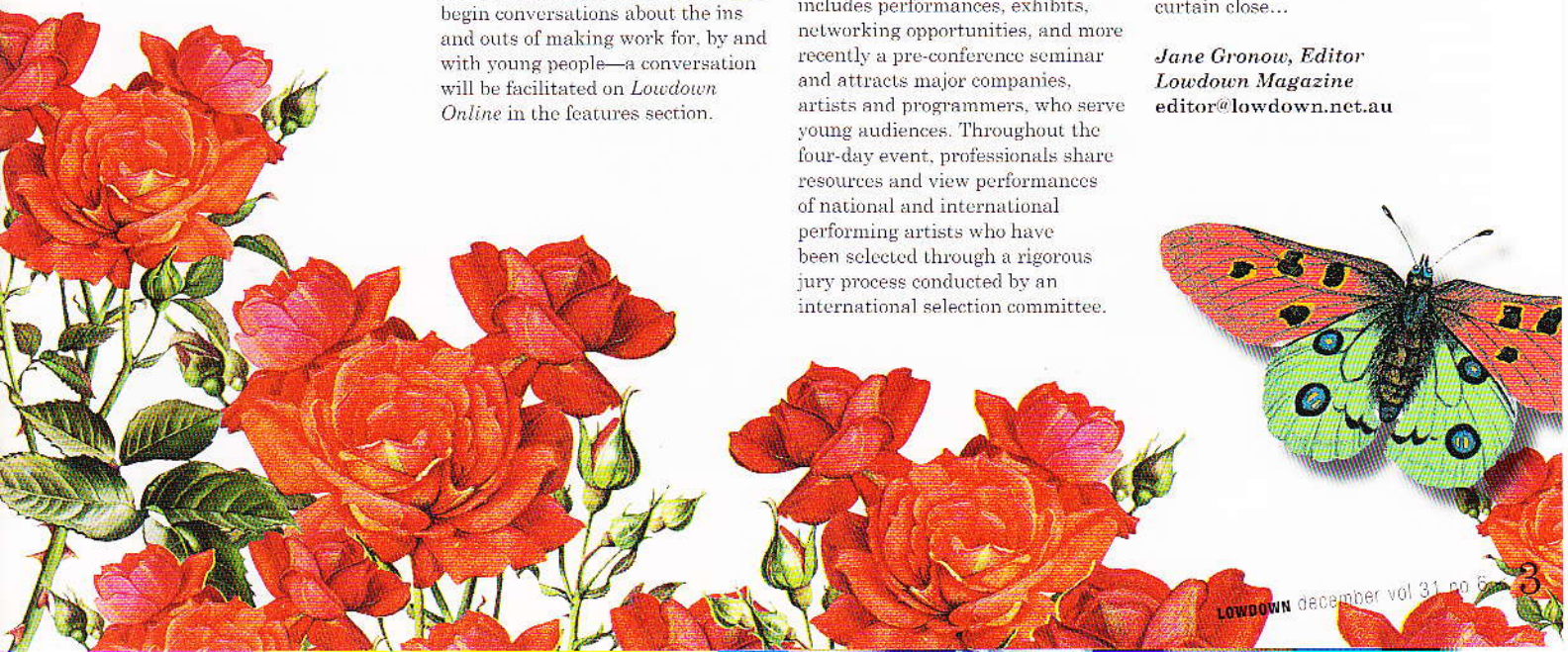


The Australia Council for the Arts market development program further supports the organisations that have been accepted and as part of their promotions at IPAY they have produced the Australian Children's Theatre Spotlight on OzArts. OzArts...showcases the best of Australia's contemporary arts to the world and promotes high-quality, export-ready contemporary Australian arts to the international decision makers.'

The website presents details of Australian presence at IPAY that includes information on Arena Theatre Company, Polyglot Theatre, Terrapin Puppet Theatre and Windmill. The December/January edition of OzArts e-news will also highlight the strong Australian presence at IPAY and will be sent to all IPAY members and delegates. It's all very exciting and you'll find information about the shows and links to the OzArts website published with the IPAY feature article on *Lowdown Online*.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank everyone who has contributed to *Lowdown* in 2009. It's been a full and challenging year and at times it's been simply about keeping the wheels turning, heads above water and snorkels well and truly unblocked. That said... curtain close...

Jane Gronow, Editor
Lowdown Magazine
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the value of a dramaturgical education

The role of the dramaturg is not widely practised in Australian theatre, at least not professionally. As an aide to the formation of a script dramaturgy is a useful process, one that can not only improve a production but also guide a writer's career. **Saffron Benner** explores how dramaturgy works and the importance of its role in helping shape the arts.

In October, the Cultural Ministers Council (CMC) defined three key areas for collaborative action over the next two to three years: arts and education, Indigenous arts and cultures, and the growth and maintenance of a dynamic arts sector. As part of their arts and education strategy, the CMC, 'will work with the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) to promote arts learning in schools and beyond for all Australians'.

While the CMC's strategy implicitly supports the intrinsic value of arts education, there are still significant questions about the form and content of the arts in schools, how they are taught, and the gap between arts education and training and professional arts practice.

Dramaturgy is one area of arts practice that is still often misunderstood in our schools and training institutions and even the arts industry itself. Yet dramaturgical skills are invaluable to teaching and learning about the arts. They are also crucial to those areas in the arts and education sectors that the CMC, funding bodies and governments are so keen to address: research and creative development, critical inquiry, collaboration, support for the arts, and the 'maintenance and growth of a dynamic arts sector' (CMC Communiqué, 9 October 2009).

So what is dramaturgy? How is it used in the arts industry and how can it be used in the classroom to enhance creative learning? I have been a professional dramaturg for almost fifteen years, and designed and taught one of the few courses in Australia on dramaturgy at Griffith University in Brisbane. Over a thirteen-week course, I reiterate to students that I cannot teach them to be a dramaturg in such a short time; but I can teach them to think dramaturgically. Almost all arts practitioners and students can benefit from developing fundamental dramaturgical skills and applying them to their own craft and learning.



Historically, dramaturgs were often responsible for contributing to the development of a national theatre and discourse about theatre's purpose.

Defining Dramaturgy

Many people still associate dramaturgy with a traditional research and text analysis role. Dramaturgy began in Germany, where theatre is generally considered to have an important social and political role to play in the community. In these contexts, conducting in-depth research and text analysis in the presentation of an extant work was/is considered crucial to (re)interpreting that play for a contemporary audience.

Historically, dramaturgs were often responsible for contributing to the development of a national theatre and discourse about theatre's purpose. The founder of dramaturgy, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729 – 1781) and subsequently Bertolt Brecht in Germany, Kenneth Tynan in the United Kingdom (UK) and John Corbin in the United States (US), were all employed to help establish a new national theatre and encourage public debate about theatre.

Today, in Germany, most theatre companies employ more than one dramaturg who works one to one with directors and publishers, rather than playwrights, to program and develop work. In the UK, 'Literary Managers' are employed by companies like the Royal Court to read and recommend scripts as well as manage playwright development programs. In the US, dramaturgs often work with directors in rehearsal rooms in the development of both new and extant work.

In contrast, Anglo-Australian theatre has a more commercially oriented theatre history, traditionally dominated by directors. The Australian National Playwrights Conference, pioneered the beginnings of dramaturgy in Australia in the early 1970s, but dramaturgy did not really become a distinct profession until the 1980s. Prior to this, new plays were developed collaboratively in small performance companies like the Australian Performance Group in Melbourne or Sydney's Nimrod Street Theatre.

So while dramaturgy in Australia emerged with the demand for more high quality new work, without a national theatre or coherent cultural policy, both dramaturgy and playwrighting tended to grow ad hoc and sporadically. Dramaturg Peter Eckersall (Gallasch and Baxter, 2003) once observed, 'In Australia... it's a matter of getting the play on and not reflecting too much'. Today, most dramaturgs work freelance with playwrights on the development of new work, outside the structure of a theatre company or production. Very few theatre companies employ a dramaturg or literary manager.

In Australia, the US and the UK, dramaturgy has been and is still sometimes treated with suspicion or misunderstanding. Since no two dramaturgs work the same way, it is a highly adaptable and dynamic practice. However, Hayley Milner, a dramaturg and drama teacher, explains that uncertainty about the role also means that it can be perceived as intrusive, '... leading to the misinterpretation that dramaturgy can "force" a playwright to choose a particular style or direction. This is a complete misinterpretation, as a script dramaturg isn't there to make choices [for the playwright]'.

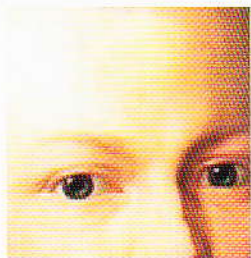
So how do dramaturgs work with artists and why are they so important?

dramad

Applying Dramaturgy

Since all dramaturgs have their own approach, it is difficult to circumscribe the craft. Many dramaturgs have strong skills in collaboration, negotiation, mediation, constructive criticism and facilitation. But all dramaturgs have their own style. Some are known for being 'tougher' than others. Some consider themselves to be the writer's 'friend' whose job it is to nurture the work. I prefer to start working with an artist at the initial idea stage, before anything is put to paper and ideas are 'fixed'. Normally, however, I am approached with an early draft.

I use a range of techniques, particularly questioning and listening; but also suggesting, reflecting, and brainstorming to help a writer develop not just their work but their craft. I believe that part of my responsibility is to help develop the writer long term (as a literal Body of work) and not just the script. Above all, I never take ownership of the work. The playwright makes the final decisions about what to write and how to write it; I simply widen the playwright's choices and examine the consequences of their decisions.



Most dramaturgs I know use questions to investigate and develop work. This technique treats playwrighting as an exploratory process with no predetermined outcome. In developing new work it is crucial to accept the script on its own terms and not impose your own 'taste', or provide answers to perceived problems. Milner agrees that 'the role of the dramaturg is to be constructive but not biased. As a dramaturg it is important not to let your own ideals and opinions shadow your feedback'. Questions empower a writer to make his/her own creative choices. They focus and open up discussion, and challenge processes and ideas. Ideally, questions should inspire the writer; facilitating progress and action. All good plays ask questions rather than provide answers, so dramaturgy needs to do the same thing.

Some artists would argue that dramaturgs are redundant, as directors, actors and designers already conduct this kind of work. Certainly, all members of a creative team can and should make valuable contributions to a new script, but I would argue that this kind of dramaturgy is often short-term and focussed on a production outcome. Much of my work with artists is concerned with other issues such as developing their craft, establishing a career, negotiating collaborations and commissions, and networking and advocacy.

Since most new work is developed outside the aegis of a theatre company, in the smaller, independent sector, dramaturgy provides a crucial bridge between companies and individuals or between smaller and larger companies. Hayley Milner explains the broader scope of dramaturgy in these circumstances:

'Many emerging writers enter the independent scene in Australia and with their first production are either praised and given success or criticised for their attempt. Instead we need to see the first production as one... part of the dramaturgy process... Even when a script is complete, sometimes there are things writers, the creative team and the dramaturg cannot foresee until the first production... Too often, after a first production, the play is put to bed without gaining feedback or ideas for creative development. It is important that we embrace dramaturgy in contemporary Australian theatre to provide support... and give more opportunities for multiple successes and growth beyond one piece of writing'.

All good plays ask questions rather than provide answers, so dramaturgy needs to do the same thing.

Teaching Dramaturgy

A good dramaturg explores an idea through its multiple possibilities; asks lots of questions; develops in-depth analytical skills; understands, constructs and deconstructs ideas in context; draws out others' creativity (often without them even realising it!); inspires and motivates; unselfishly shares knowledge and ideas; and creates opportunities for artists and their work to go beyond their preconceived potential.

There are obvious parallels here to arts educators, as Milner explains, 'Attributes a dramaturg and a teacher have which coincide with each other are trust, diplomacy, collaboration and altruistic inquiry... Ultimately both a teacher and dramaturg want to create a supportive environment in which the student, performer or playwright can develop as artists and understand their potential to create their own goals and find answers and knowledge within themselves'.

In fact, she says, many teachers are already using dramaturgy, even if they don't know it: 'in a sense dramaturgical skills are already a fundamental part of the teaching practice, [however] not many teachers realise there is a name for some of the things they are already doing with their students. Activities like peer evaluations, group discussions, providing drafts and showing sneak peeks or a showcase of creative work in the classroom are all dramaturgy skills'.

Milner believes that teachers are not the only dramaturgs, either: 'I use dramaturgy as a drama teacher all the time and I don't just look at myself as the only dramaturg in the classroom. I might have five dramaturgs emerging from group based work, or twenty dramaturgs giving feedback on one piece of work. As a dramaturg and teacher I am there to mentor my students to develop and grow as artists, and give them the opportunities to see their work grow through questioning, mapping out ideas and creative processes... You can't just give a student an assessment to write a script, monologue... or any type of forming assessment without helping them dramaturgically with some of these simple exercises'.

Dramaturgy provides an opportunity for some students to apply skills that may not have been traditionally valued in drama classrooms: 'They may not be the creators of the performance, the writers or the strong performers to execute it, and as a result they are often overlooked. They may be the ones who assessed the work,



found gaps which just didn't quite make sense and helped fill them, considered ways to add in symbolism or bring depth to characters.

Dramaturgy, Milner insists, is an important part of current and future students' arts education, partly because: 'It's important for students to understand there is a name for the process they are going through' but, more importantly, for the future of dramaturgy itself: 'by learning these skills... students can implement the use of a dramaturg[y] as they develop in their careers... It is the time now, through education and implementation, where Generation Y can be open to the dramaturg, bringing meaning, [and] understanding to the profession and helping to fight off negative associations with the word'.

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Thanks to Hayley Milner, dramaturg and teacher at Marsden State High School.

Gallasch, K and Baxter, V. (2003). Working the Weave. *RealTime*. No. 58. December-January. Open City: Sydney. pp. 38 & 40. Available: <http://www.realtimearts.net/>

Saffron Benner is a professional dramaturg and the Executive Director of Playlab Inc – a peak service organisation for the development and publication of new performance work. She also has extensive experience as an academic and tertiary arts educator.

SHAPING THE AESTHETIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH WESLEY ENOCH

Join playwright and director Wesley Enoch in an interview with **Mark Radvan**, who explains his process and reveals some interesting observations when comparing directing works for children and directing works for the Indigenous community.

Over a professional theatre career spanning fifteen years, Wesley Enoch's directing credits have carved a swathe across Indigenous writing with productions of Gilbert's *Cherry Pickers*, Davis' *The Dreamers* and Jane Harrison's *Stolen* to name but a few. His writing credits are almost as many including co-writing *The 7 Stages of Grieving* with Deborah Mailman, and winning the 2006 Patrick White Award for his play *Cookie's Table*.

Perhaps less visibly, since 2005 Enoch has also directed a suite of works for children and young people that include most recently *Nargun* and *the Stars* for ERTH Visual and Physical Inc. and *Boat* for the KITE Arts and Education program @QPAC, as well as a range of work for the last two Out of the Box Festivals of Early Childhood that are held biennially in Brisbane, Queensland.

In a recent telephone interview with Mark Radvan, Enoch discussed some of the issues underlying *Boat* and made some interesting observations comparing directing works for children with directing works for adults and for the Indigenous community.

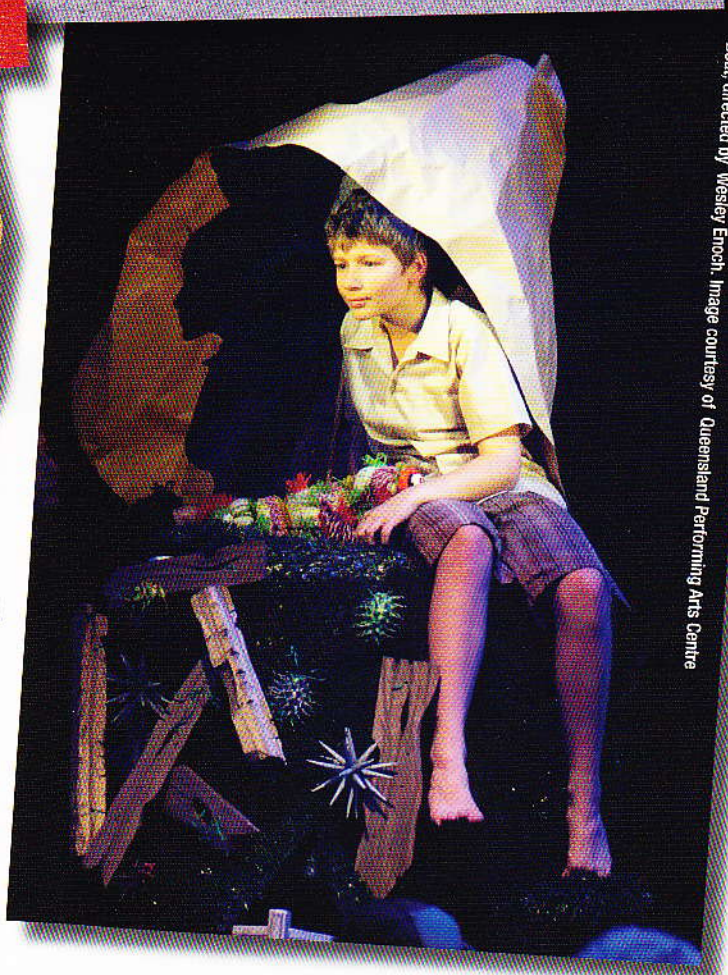
The relationship the director has with the audience came up as an immediate point of difference – 'creating works for adult audiences, we work off our own experiences and our own view of the world and attract an audience that has a similar view of the world.' An opposite approach is required for directing works for children. As with Indigenous theatre, the director of theatre for children must consciously enter the cultural world of the audience rather than assume the audience will come to his/hers.

There is actually a danger, Enoch feels, if the director works from memories of his/her own childhood experience. Memory is shrouded in nostalgia and adults invariably mythologise their own childhoods and project on to children their own notions of what constitutes childhood.

Is it ever possible for adults to create a theatre for children that is not infused by adult memories, desires and needs? It's hard and Enoch confesses that: 'there's a highly propagandist perspective in my head of what I think children should be learning or doing [in the theatre], though you do try to subvert these kinds of things, you can't work [completely] against them.'

One is reminded of the point made strongly by James Kincaid, author and academic: '...children's theater... exists only as a pedagogical tool or as a repository for adult needs. We can write plays and gather children into an auditorium—I mean, what choice do they have?—and run it at them. But what is happening? Can we say that all children's theater is heavy propaganda, training lessons in what it means to be a child, that is, what adults want and need children to be?'

Inevitably, the buyers of children's theatre are adults. The necessity for theatre companies to sell to them often makes them feel obliged to highlight values such as nostalgia, as with *Nargun* and *the Stars* where 'adults remember the book and think of growing up with it as a child', or to underscore the 'educational' benefits of the work.



Boat, directed by Wesley Enoch. Image courtesy of Queensland Performing Arts Centre

This is a dilemma that in its own way also exists in the Indigenous theatre where Enoch argues there is a need, 'to break what I think is a real nostalgia about Aboriginal theatre [we need] to go further and look at more adventurous artistic development in Indigenous theatre.'

He sees nostalgia as being very limiting, hindering one from imagining the future. 'What nostalgia does is try to replicate what we imagine the past was. In Indigenous theatre it's for a political end and in theatre for young people an educative end—maybe they are the same thing...? A lot of Aboriginal theatre wants to use nostalgia—a sense of writing on to the public record our history—as a way of educating non-Indigenous people how to react and how to understand us as a people culturally.'

This opens into an issue of the role of the audience. It is the non-Indigenous audience that pays for or funds the theatre work, and their presence in the audience creates a pressure to ask the question—what do we want to say to them? What is it we wish to teach them? As with theatre for children a pedagogical agenda implicitly manifests. The work is addressing its target audience while at the same time trying to maintain a dialogue with the audience that pays for it.

Enoch argues that this pedagogical agenda is manifested in much of the dramaturgy of children's theatre. In adult drama there are always: 'two or more opposing ideas, views or people struggling to come to some sort of end point at some point in the show, whereas for the children's theatre there is a view that the moral of the story often drives all the narrative plot points.'

Boat, directed by
Wesley Enoch.
Image courtesy of
Queensland Performing
Arts Centre

Is it ever possible
for adults to create
a theatre for
children that is not
infused by adult
memories, desires
and needs?

Artistically this translates into
a discussion about form and
content.

'I see a connection in both
Indigenous theatre and theatre
for young people about this
relationship between form and
content, that when its most
successful the form shifts and
changes around the story that
wants to be told. That there's a
freedom to do that in both those
contexts – you do a work about
the stolen generations and you
can then shape the form around
the feeling of dislocation, and the
emotional settings of each of the
characters. In the same way with
theatre for young people.... you
don't have to play by the rules
that whatever other forms of
theatre take you can ask what's
the greatest impact this story
can have? How can we engage
with the audience by letting the
content change and influence the
form of the way we are engaging
with them?

'Directing and working with
young people, telling stories with
young people at Contact actually
helped shape my aesthetic as
an Indigenous director. So some
of my earlier work like *7 Stages
of Grieving* is absolutely based
on the research and the work I
was doing with Contact, working
with kids in prison and similar
experiences.'

Mark Radvan is a Lecturer in Theatre at
Queensland University of Technology. He is also
the Artistic Director of Queensland's Imaginary
Theatre and a previous Artistic Director of the
Out of the Box Festival for 3 to 8 year olds
(2006 & 2008).

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Kincaid, J.R. (2003) Youth Theatre Journal, p58
Natasha Budd, email dated 21/09/09

Boat didn't offer
the children a
point of view or
explanations, but
left it up to them
to interpret what
they saw.

Moving from a theatre of explicit
moral to a more open work
was one rationale behind the
recent *Boat* project, directed by
Enoch and authored by Janis
Balodis, with the KITE Arts and
Education program at Queensland
Performing Arts Centre (QPAC)

The idea for *Boat* emerged from
a series of workshop-based
performance programs called
Yonder that KITE had run in the
kinds of outer Brisbane suburbs
that the *Vinson Report* saw as
'dropping off the edge'. From
the workshops it became clear
to KITE's two teacher-artists
Adrianne Jones and Natasha
Budd that many of the children
they were working with had
never travelled more than a few
kilometers from their homes and
had certainly never visited
the city.

Paradoxically, the opposite
was also the case. According
to Budd, there were many
children with extraordinary
stories of journeying from Iraq,
Afghanistan, Cambodia, Burma,
Samoa and many other places
across the globe only to arrive in
Ipswich and Logan, where the risk
of social exclusion is the highest
in the state. The Yonder project
involved having the children
imagine what it would be like to
go on a long journey, and this was
capped off by a visit to QPAC,
where they participated in an
improvised performative version
of their story.

The *Boat* Project took the results
of this research and created
a poetic journey that distilled
many of the images and themes
associated with Yonder, into a
daydream Odyssey. Performed
by a young boy in the original
studio version, and then by a

boyish-looking adult actor when
it was remounted for the 2008
Out of the Box Festival. A quirky
and interesting set by Jonathon
Oxlade was complemented by
David Walters' beautiful lighting.
The audience sat on the floor with
the action weaving through and
around them.

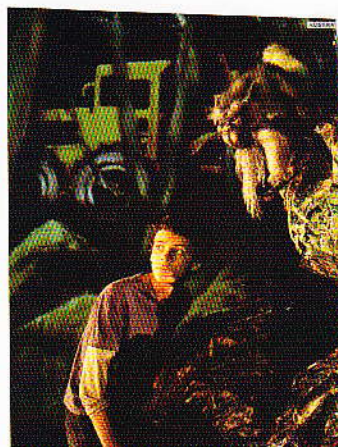
As an open work, *Boat* didn't
offer the children a point of view
or explanations, but left it up to
them to interpret what they saw.
While its central character, the
Boy, embodied a human being
in the act of investigating and
learning there was no sense that
'learning a lesson' defined his
primary dramatic function.

However, for a work deliberately
open to interpretation, the
question arises as to how it can
be tested if its dramaturgy has
no pedagogy to interrogate or
no moral to deconstruct? And
what about the complex issue
of consulting children who have
limited vocabulary and who are
trained to tell adults what they
want to hear? Would consultation
be even more problematic with a
work open to interpretation?

A strategy Enoch found invaluable
was the placing of a number of
'experts' among the children in
the test audience. Their brief
was not to analyse their response
to the play, but to analyse the
audience's—and then to read/
interpret the play through their
eyes. This provided a depth of
feedback that could go beyond,
'When are they laughing? When
are they shuffling?' and could
focus on what sense the audience
were actually making of their
experience, rather than just
measuring their attention.

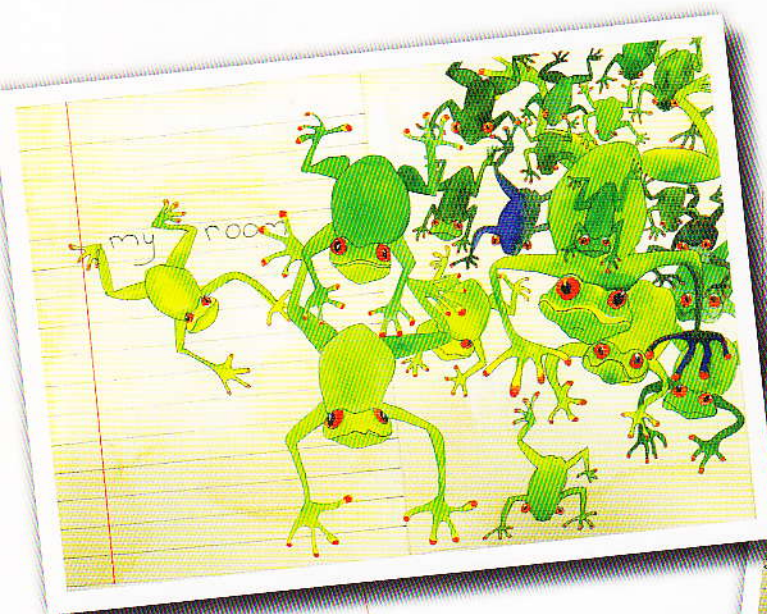
An objective for Wesley is to
get past the extrinsic educative
good of a piece and to find its
intrinsic value in its own terms
artistically. 'This selling thing
through education I find really
hard because as an artist surely
the work should be engaged with
on an artistic level. [We have] to
challenge the buyers' values to
shift to a new metric, the metrics
of the inherent value of artistic
experiences rather than how it
will engage with their creativity
and imagination in a scholastic
way. That's a real trap.'

Nargun and the Stars -
Simon and Turongs.
Photo by Heidrun Lohr



The man with the child in his eyes

Kim Carpenter's Theatre of Image has been staging high quality and unique theatrical experiences for Australian and international audiences since 1988. In December 2009, Theatre of Image will premiere their latest production, *The Book of Everything*, at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre. **Tracy Ellis** caught up with Carpenter on day one of rehearsals.



Kim Carpenter was browsing in Leura in the Blue Mountains, when he discovered Dutch author Guus Kuijer's novel for young people, *The Book of Everything*. Carpenter wasn't looking for a project, just something good to read. 'I found it very funny, very moving, and very unusual,' he says, and describes it as, 'a universal story about a boy whose greatest wish is to be happy.'

Carpenter read the book in one sitting and said to himself: 'I can see it in three dimensions, with actors on the stage.' Kuijer is a highly regarded children's author in Holland, but this is the first of his books to be translated into English. Coincidentally, the translation is by Melbourne author John Nieuwenhuizen.

The story's protagonist, Thomas Klopper, is a nine-year old boy with a vivid imagination. He records his experiences—real and imagined—in his 'book of everything'. It's an exercise that helps him cope with a troubled home life, which is ruled by his father, a religious zealot prone to violent outbursts, who uses the most literal interpretation of the Bible to oppress his family. In Thomas's house, 'there is no music, there is no art as such, or anything beyond the bible,' explains Carpenter.

The story is set not long after the Second World War, in 1951. Through an encounter with his neighbour, Mrs Van Amersfoort—a widow who lost her husband at the hands of the Nazis and lives alone with her cats, books and music—Thomas starts to glimpse an alternative life.

'To Thomas she is eccentric, but interesting, and completely the antithesis of the father's image of the family and the family household,' says Carpenter. 'She introduces him to Louis Armstrong, which is pretty radical. As Thomas says, the first negro he's ever heard of ... an opposition starts to build within him, he sees there's another world out there.'

The external characters in the play encourage Thomas. 'As you do want to encourage a child that you perceive to have a vivid imagination,' says Carpenter, and they too are transformed by their interaction with him. 'You get all these quite rich characters coming together and they're all sort of liberated.'

Carpenter contacted veteran Australian children's author Richard Tulloch to discuss the possibility of a stage adaptation. The two have worked together many times before; 'This would be our ninth or tenth collaboration,' says Carpenter.

Tulloch is married to a Dutch woman and spends six months of each year living in Amsterdam. Because he speaks the language he was able to read the book in Dutch, and as Carpenter says, was so inspired, 'he immediately sat down and did an adaptation, unprompted, before any fee was negotiated.'

With the play written, Carpenter took it to Neil Armfield at Belvoir Street. 'I thought that Neil would relate to the story strongly,' says Carpenter.

Armfield and Carpenter also share a creative history that goes back a surprisingly long way; 'Neil and I have come full-circle because we were co-artistic directors at Nimrod [now Belvoir Street Theatre] together with John Bell. We were appointed together when Richard Wherrett left to go to the Sydney Theatre Company.'

This was thirty years ago, in 1979.

Both Armfield and Carpenter went their separate ways and each has realised an impressive body of theatrical work, but while Carpenter's work has been in the realm of children's theatre, Armfield is best known for more contemporary adult-oriented work, often with a distinctly

Australian flavour.

His first foray into feature film was the hard-hitting *Candy*, which starred the late Heath Ledger.

The Book of Everything will run for a six-week season in the upstairs theatre at Belvoir Street.

'This is the perfect piece to come back to in every way,' says Carpenter, 'because at the heart of it, it's about real people and ordinary people that we can all relate to. I always think Neil is fantastic at bringing out the humanity and making the ordinary seem extraordinary to a big audience.'

The 350 seat theatre at Belvoir Street is very particular and can be a challenging space for a designer. 'It's an asymmetrical space and you have to be very careful how you design it and what you put on the stage. It's not what you do in a proscenium theatre. What you see is what you get. Everything's declared and that informs the conventions and styles of the design, the production, the presentation, the acting.'

'You are sharing the room with the audience and if you start to get into anything too illusionary or fanciful and contrived, it backfires.'

As the name Theatre of Image implies, design is always the key informative element in all Carpenter's productions. He is considered to be Australia's only professional designer director.

While he's reluctant to give too much away about how the show will look, he says: 'The audience accesses Thomas's inner life and we see the world through his eyes, including the pages of his 'book of everything' ... that is key to the design and imagery.'

'I was keen to design something that didn't just sit there and because it's a space where it's hard to get rid of things, because there's no flying, there's no wing space to exit anything... what we came up with it a set that performs, that changes from scene to scene as Thomas's view of the world changes,' says Carpenter.

When casting the actors, both Carpenter and Armfield looked for a childlike quality. The cast of nine will include Julie Forsyth, John Leary, Deborah Kennedy and Matt Whittet as Thomas.

'It's a cast of clowns and a cast of people who are all very good, highly intelligent actors and they all have the child very much alive,' says Carpenter. 'And any actor that can play an instrument will be useful.'

Iain Grandage (*Cloudstreet*) will compose the score, which will all be played live. The five-and-a-half-week rehearsal period, which is longer than normal, will enable Grandage to develop the music in tandem.

Photos by Alex Craig.
Designs by Kim Carpenter.

One of the things that drew Carpenter to *The Book of Everything* was the way it handled the issues of domestic violence and religious fanaticism, but he insists, 'It's not a social issue piece.'

'It's in the story, and it has to be in the story, but it's dealt with in a very delicate way ... there are moments that are confronting, but it's just there. It's not about that.'

'The story has a very particular quality that is at one moment very funny, and the next moment you feel the tears welling up in your eyes because it is so tender and loving.'

'You're confronted by the domestic violence, and then it goes away, so it's the way that all these elements have been woven together in the book in what is a very simple story, but actually very layered - there's an enormous amount in it.'

One of the characters is Jesus, who appears to Thomas as a normal, but older, boy.

'The treatment of Jesus, and the way Jesus is just another boy, another friend, in a sense is disrespectful, but in a way that couldn't offend,' says Carpenter.

The presence of Jesus and other references to God caused some nervousness in previous stage adaptations of the book. The National Theatre in England did an adaptation and took the word 'God' out.

Carpenter has experienced this kind of nervousness before.

'We did *The Happy Prince* in Canada and the week before we opened the artistic director decided we should take the word 'God' out. These are the words of Oscar Wilde, and they're crucial to the story. Anyone who knows the story knows the lines in the last scene where God says to his angels "Bring me the two most precious things in the whole world."

As the name Theatre of Image implies, design is always the key informative element in all Carpenter's productions.

The author Guus Kuijer was apparently unhappy with the National Theatre's production and so when it came time for him to review Richard Tulloch's script, which will be published here by Currency Press, Kuijer had three questions before he read it: Is Jesus called Jesus? Does he say the things he says in the book? Is the stage adaptation as disrespectful as the book?

Carpenter answered yes to all three. Regarding any disrespect he says, 'it's in that Australian way - in an irreverent, good-humoured and loving way.'

The last time I caught up with Carpenter he was preparing *Julie the Iceberg*, a poetic piece about an iceberg that travels from the Arctic to the Antarctic, exploring the vast beauty of the world and the threats to it from climate change and environmental degradation.

'The story was quite slight and you had to embellish it and enrich it with imagery,' says Carpenter. In contrast, *The Book of Everything*, he says, is 'by no means slight.'

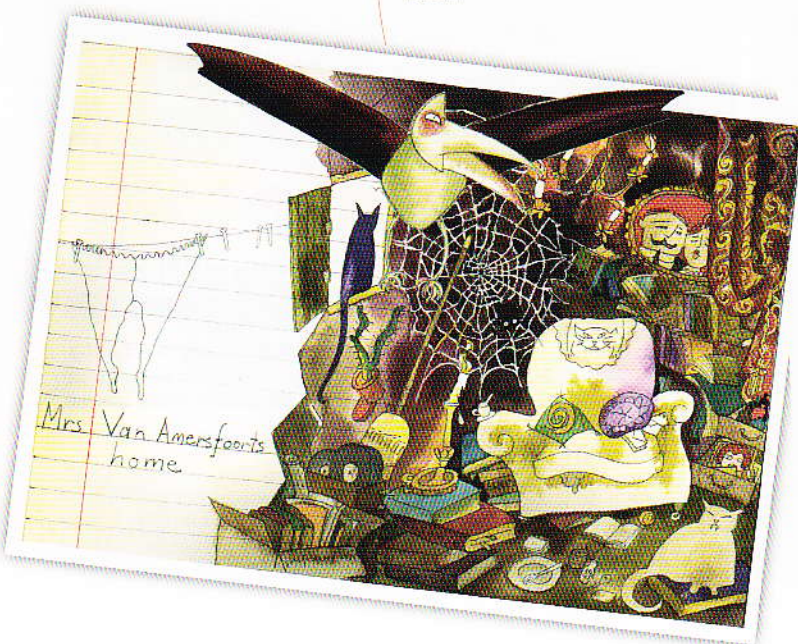
'The story is why we are doing it.'

In the past, Theatre of Image has produced two plays based on the work of David Malouf. Carpenter cites Malouf as his favourite Australian novelist and also a good friend, so it 'cut to the quick' when Malouf said to him 'you shouldn't be doing this for children, you'll never be recognised'.

'I know exactly what he means,' explains Carpenter, but adds: 'I think when we do something we always do it with a big audience in mind. We don't just think children. We do think that it will appeal to an intergenerational audience on different levels.'

Tracy Ellis is a freelance writer with an extensive background in the arts. She graduated from VCA's School of Drama but traded acting for music, playing in several bands while working at various arts organisations.

Designed for ages eight and up, *The Book of Everything* commences at Belvoir Street Theatre on December 27. If you can't get to the show, the book of the same name, a 'startling book for young and old', is published in Australia by Allen and Unwin.





theatre for young people in new zealand

Stephen Blackburn, General Manager of Capital E, National Theatre for Children in Wellington, New Zealand presents a brief overview of the sector producing and supporting theatre for young people.

I have been asked to write a little about the theatre sector for young people in New Zealand. My first response was that to call it a 'sector' may be to overstate its significance in the overall theatrical landscape of Aotearoa.

I am constantly amazed on my visits to Australia at the level of investment, commitment and rigour brought to the creation of work that speaks to, and about, young people on your continent. The respect given to artists and companies that specialise in delivering work to this section of the community is heart-warming.

Sadly the same cannot be said about New Zealand. This might partly be due to the fact that the entire country has a smaller population than Sydney, but it also may be linked to the lack of investment, over many decades, for this crucial area of the arts.

There are, of course, bastions of dedicated people that pursue the dream and inspire others to take up the torch. People like Sally Markham in Auckland, Jenny Wake in the Hawke's Bay and Tim Bray Productions. Also in Wellington is Deirdre Tarrant with Footnote Dance and of course Capital E, a not-for-profit organisation with the sole focus on children and their creativity, and also where I work as General Manager of the National Theatre for Children.

Capital E, based in Wellington, is a centre dedicated to offering inspirational creative technology and live performance experiences for children aged two to twelve. It was opened in 1997 under the management of the Wellington Museums Trust with an agenda set by the then CEO, John Gilberthorpe, to be home to a professional theatre company creating quality works for children.

Peter Lyndon Wilson, originally from Tasmania, but at that time based in Perth, was invited to the centre to begin the task of forging the way for the company.

Since 2000 the company has embarked on annual national programs touring both main islands, and now performs in up to sixteen centres to an average annual audience of 50,000 children. It doesn't perform public seasons outside Wellington very often and, as a result, is almost

unknown throughout the rest of the country, and even in parts of the arts sector.

As a national company it is shaping itself to serve a variety of functions. For most of its audience it is the only professional arts experience that many attend. As a result we are striving to act as a gateway to all the performing arts; commissioning dance, music, opera, drama as well as puppetry works.

We are moving to a structure that encourages practitioners to engage more with this demographic through collaborations and commissions, as well as approaching professional artists to join us on the journey to inspire young people. Capital E is funded by Creative New Zealand, the arts advocacy body; through the Wellington Museums Trust, by the Wellington City Council; as well as regional community trusts and box office profits.

Wanting to expand its contact with international companies and artists, as well as benchmarking themselves against overseas work, Capital E and the National Theatre instituted a biennial festival in 2003. In its last incarnation in March 2009, the festival presented nine productions to over 40,000 people. Over the course of two weeks, five overseas productions joined forces with two new commissions, a work by the national Maori theatre Company Taki Rua and

our own flagship production, a ground-breaking opera for children called *Kia ora Khalid*.

The festival offers the National Theatre an opportunity to look beyond the necessary constraints of a touring company and push boundaries both in production and content and thereby push the critics and new audiences to take more notice of the depth of work created for this very important audience. With each new project, be it an opera, a dance collaboration or a symphonic work, we move closer to achieving our goal to offer truly accessible world class theatre to young New Zealanders.

So, in the same way as I encourage advocacy here in New Zealand, I encourage you to engage in dialogue with us; about work, about artists, about collaborations. We can learn a lot from the sector in Australia—and we do—but I dare say we have something to teach as well. ☺

LOWDOWN online

Answer Stephen's call to action by posting your comment on Lowdown Online in the feature article section.

Go to www.lowdown.net.au

Stephen Blackburn joined the National Theatre for Children in late 2003 as General Manager. He has worked in theatre for almost 30 years in NZ, USA and the UK.

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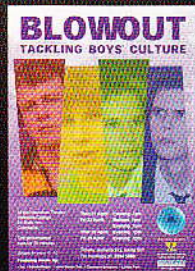
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This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body. Contact Inc is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, and has received financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.



Queensland
Government



Tank

Canberra Youth Theatre

Writer Adam Hadley.

Director Pip Buining.

Design Imogen Keen.

Puppets Hilary Talbot.

Sound Kimmo Vennonen.

Canberra Youth Theatre and the 2009 Actors Ensemble.

Floriade, Commonwealth Park, September 2009.

Spring has come to Canberra and with it the annual Floriade Festival. Commonwealth Park, on the edge of Lake Burley Griffin bursts into a vivid display of flowers during a festival renowned for its floral delights and open air performances. I follow a path through the thronging admirers of the park in bloom, past hyacinths, irises, daffodils and tulips until I reach a bed of bright orange poppies.

It is there that I see it—a large, circular, rubber water tank, bearing the sign, Museum of Water. Designer Imogen Keen's ingeniously conceived mobile theatre, structurally designed by Geoff Farquhar-Still, contains the performance space for Canberra Youth Theatre's (CYT) specially commissioned work, *Tank*, performed during Floriade by Canberra Youth Theatre's 2009 Actors Ensemble under the direction of CYT's Artistic Director, Pip Buining.

Appropriately concerned with the vital issue of water usage and conservation, and devised for performance at a festival reliant on water for its success, *Tank* was devised in 2008 by a workshop group of 7-12 year olds under the tutelage of playwright, Adam Hadley. The ideas reflect both the ages of the young people and their serious concern for the preservation of Australia's most precious natural resource, at a time of severe drought and peril to the nation's river systems.

Hadley has shaped the burgeoning imaginations of the workshop participants into a series of six, short six-minute scenes. Each scene is presented in a cycle to a maximum audience of six at any one time within the intimate Museum of Water. The final work, incorporating the ideas of the younger, mini ensemble, has then been given to the 17-25 year old Actors Ensemble to perform for visitors to Floriade during the weekends of the festival.

Tank tells the story of Francis (Ethan Gibson) and Charlie (Sarah Thomson) and their journey through the Museum of Water. Each journey represents a scene in the play's cycle during which the two young visitors confront a weird and wonderful array of characters and adventures that teach them important lessons about the use and abuse of water.

The audience, seated on six stools and within touching distance of the performers are guided through their journey by Historians, Gwendolen (Alison McCarthy) and Geoffrey (Callum Doyle-Scott). At the entrance to the museum, they converse with the waiting audience and take a poll to determine their attitudes towards the issue.

Nearby, under the direction of Hadley, members of the 2009 mini ensemble, regaled in period costumes, entertain passers by with songs, commentary, debates and quack sales routines that lend a festive carnival air. Lacking a certain bombastic bravura of the brash spruikers of bygone eras, these novice street performers exuded a charm and novelty that would obviously develop as they grew more accustomed to the street theatre style of performance.

Each section of the museum tells its own story: sometimes ridiculous - water evolved from a failed experiment in the search for petrol as expounded by glove puppets, Professor Hans Scolding (Melissa Veamaathau) and Dr. Donaldine Logan Bridgeworthy

reviews

(Amelia Hewett); sometimes fantastical - water was stolen and sold by the nefarious bushranger, Captain Max Kadoo; occasionally bizarre - water turns into rats, and Martian Zombies (Alison McGregor and Amelia Hewett) threaten our water supply; at times didactic - Francis and Charlie launch an attack on bottled water, mount a plea for responsible recycling and encounter a Polar Bear, forced to sell water in a supermarket as the ice caps melt; not surprisingly environmental - the effect of shrinking water levels on sea life; and finally prophetic - the drought is over and Water (Alison McGregor) appears to persuade people to learn the lessons of water conservation. With the help of dinghy sailing, fishing Gramps (a feisty performance from Jessica Chambers), Francis and Charlie learn the value of water and their responsibility to build a water conserved future.

Humorous, instructive, entertaining and played with enthusiasm and panache, *Tank* provides an ideal opportunity for members of Canberra Youth Theatre to explore their craft in a different performance venue, develop new skills in acting, improvisation and interactive techniques, develop skills in puppetry with the assistance of

tutors and puppeteers, Hilary Talbot and Cathy Mann and raise awareness of an important social, political and economic issue in an unique and relevant theatre experience.

If the function of youth theatre is to create innovative opportunities for young people to develop their craft, then *Tank* is another example of Canberra Youth Theatre's ingenious and imaginative contribution to its members and the community it serves. Theatrically, *Tank* still reflects a somewhat simplistic approach to its scripting and exposition. It's somewhat confused and fragmented narrative still needs to discover reason in its zaniness and a spine to its structure that will give clearer meaning to its imaginative and significant concept. There is little opportunity to plunge the depths of this important issue, and many of the ideas are diluted by the picaresque nature of its episodic structure.

Nonetheless, in the tradition of good youth theatre and with the voice of a concerned future generation, its message flows easily enough into our reservoir of thoughts and gives us cause to contemplate the future. ☺

Peter Wilkins is a former deputy chief examiner of the International Baccalaureate Theatre Arts curriculum and an executive council member of the International Schools Theatre Association. Peter is also a freelance writer and reviewer with The Canberra Times.



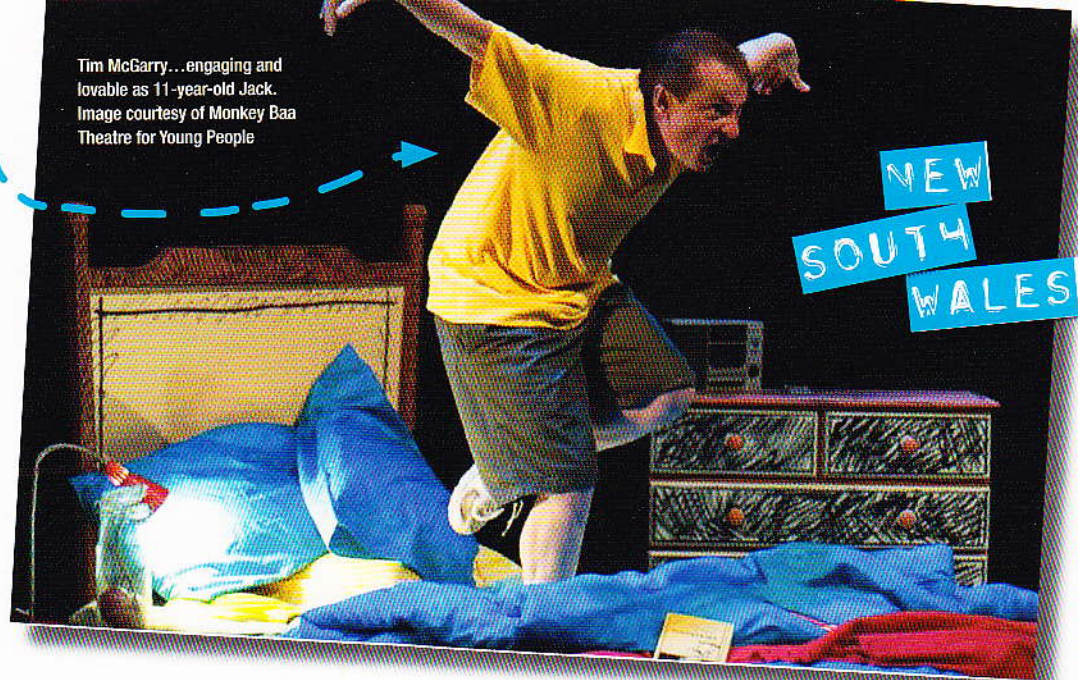
Image courtesy of
Canberra Youth Theatre

I Am Jack

Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People

Written by Susanne Gervay's
Adapted for the stage by Eva Di Cesare, Sandra Eldridge and Tim McGarry
Director Sandra Eldridge
Design Alice Lindstrom
Lighting Design Luiz Pampolha
Sound Design Jeremy Silver
Dramaturge Caleb Lewis
Production Manager/Stage Manager 2008 Luke Cowling
Assistant Stage Manager 2008 Peta Dyce
Stage Manager 2009 Tour Peta Dyce
Performed by Tim McGarry

Tim McGarry...engaging and lovable as 11-year-old Jack.
 Image courtesy of Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People



School can be tough, and kids can be cruel. Monkey Baa tackles the subject of bullying with an adaptation of Susanne Gervay's *I Am Jack*, based on a true story. For the 95th performance of this dynamic one-hander, Year 3 and 4 school children from Greenwich Public School filled the small theatre at Sydney's Seymour Centre.

The subject of bullying is tricky: How do you give kids the tools to deal with a bully, or as in the case of Jack, a gang of them led by a potent ringleader? Seeking help is essential, but risks further isolating the victim and cementing their reputation as a 'dobber' and 'do-gooder'. When a child is cowed and scared to draw further attention to themselves, the problem can go on and on, slipping under the radar of both teachers and parents. Many adults bear the scars of seemingly innocuous schoolyard shenanigans.

Tim McGarry is engaging and lovable as 11-year-old Jack, trying to find a way to speak to his Mum about his problem, while she is preoccupied with a new boyfriend about to move in and the regular presence of Jack's grandmother. McGarry plays all roles — Jack, Nanna, Mum, the boyfriend, teachers, bullies, and the heroic 11-year-old Anna who eventually comes to his rescue. His deft timing, physicality and range of elastic, comical voices deliver a big-hearted performance that, with credit due also to the writers and director, captures the vulnerability and pathos without resorting to sentimentality.

Jack's bedroom is the sole set for all the action. It's a clever collection of typical boys' bedroom furniture, scribbled over in fat permanent marker, reminiscent of the lockers, desks, bags and books that populate the world of any school-age kid.

The bedroom is like Jack's consciousness—we are inside his mind all the time, filled as it is with books of jokes, 'scientific' experiments involving mutant vegetables growing in jars, a promising hobby in photography and underlying anxiety, expressed by the scrawled-over furniture.

This cluttered but compact set, designed to be portable and allow the production to travel with just one actor and a technician, served the action well except when Jack projected a slideshow of his photography onto the headboard of his bed. The angle was a bit skewed and the image too small. The poetry was lost, and turned what might have been an important intimate interlude, into a flat spot that felt like marking time.

McGarry, with simple lighting and sound effects, takes us from schoolyard to classroom, soccer field to beach, without leaving Jack's bedroom. There was a magical moment when, walking along the seashore, Jack sees a giant washed-up jellyfish and stops to marvel at the gelatinous mass. Describing it as a 'ball of snot with tentacles', half the audience spontaneously rose out of their seats to better see the theatre floor.

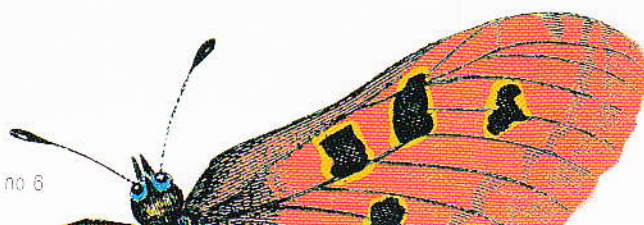
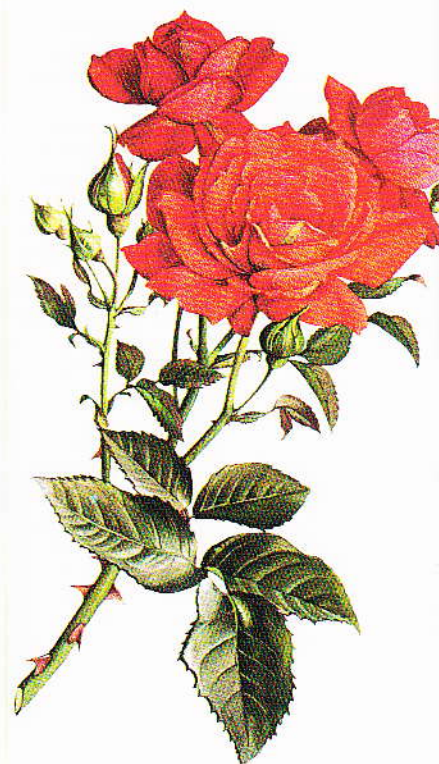
There were plenty of laughs and McGarry knew when he had the audience eating out of the palm of his hands, milking any joke that was working. When Jack plays a game of cards with his Nan, she takes an age each time it's her turn, much to the impatience of Jack and the rolling giggles of the audience.

But then there's the seriousness of the bullying, which grows from troubling to traumatic. Jack is beaten with a cricket bat and spat on in the showers by a gang of boys. He's frightened and alone—even his two best friends desert him under pressure from Hammill's growing gang. His imperious 'nearly-best friend' Anna, daughter of the local migrant fruit shop owner, can't take it anymore and tells her father everything, who in turn alerts the adults. Jack's mother visits the school and threatens to enrol Jack elsewhere. The principal is contrite and apologises to Jack for letting him down and asks him to consider returning, ensuring him: 'You won't be alone, we'll fight this together.'

The bully isn't expelled; Jack has two days off, with a list of chores from his mum that make him feel useful and, along with the lightness that comes from finally unburdening himself, boosts his confidence. He returns to school under the close watch of the principal who, when the time is right, teams him up for a project with the bully himself, George Hammill. Jack makes the discovery that George isn't too bright, maybe can't read and write so well and even finds he feels sorry for him.

If only it were this easy. In the Q&A afterwards, when the question 'Why do you think Jack was bullied?' was put to the audience, the answers came fast: 'Because he was small', 'Because he was a little bit different', 'Because he was a mummy's boy', 'Because he wasn't on the footy team...' It's a pity they seemed to miss the message that it wasn't Jack's fault; that the problem was George, the bully himself, who, if he hadn't picked on Jack, would have found another victim on which to vent his own feelings of inadequacy. ★

Tracy Ellis is a freelance writer with an extensive background in the arts. She graduated from VCA's School of Drama but traded acting for music, playing in several bands while working at various arts organisations.



The Pirates' Ship

Urban Myth Theatre of Youth

Adapted by Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People and members of Urban Myth.

Author of Original book Gillian Rubinstein

Theatre adaptation Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People & members of Urban Myth

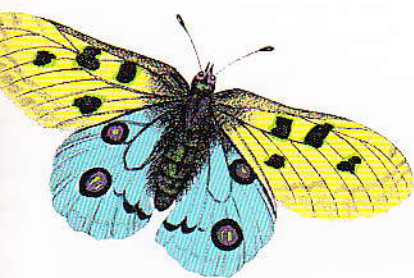
Director Glenn Hayden

Designer Kerry Reid

Lighting design Nivven Barlow

Performers Edwin Kemp Attrill, Isabelle Danforth-Smith, Lily Chester, Sophia Simmons, Alice Blanch, Guy O'Grady and Johnny Roberts.

The Pirates' Ship tells the tale of Troy, who lives by the sea with his sister Tania and their extended family. Troy is obsessed with pirates and ocean treasure. One day, to his utter delight, a message in a bottle washes up on shore. Then a strange looking man arrives wanting to buy Uncle Dave's boat. Troy is certain he is a pirate. Troy and Tania piece together the puzzle and discover not only a kidnapping but treasure and a posse of pirates as well.



Gillian Rubinstein's *The Pirates' Ship* is a children's book, an early reader for six years and over. Urban Myth has taken up the challenge of making children's theatre with young people. Seven of the company's senior members and an Urban Myth creative team with scripting assistance from Monkey Baa, have adapted the storybook for the stage.

Rubinstein's book provides an Australian story depicting a little boy's wild imagination, play, fun and adventure. Aspects of the work on stage point to a playful two-week creative development generating the stage script. Judging from the energy and fun on stage, the cast has experienced a wonderful opportunity workshopping, rehearsing and performing the play they have generated. The story's aspects of wild imaginings and adventure have not flowed into the production though and there are moments when play and fun from the cast is pumped to the point of straining.

The feeling pervading is that the young theatre makers are in search of adventure and wild imaginings but the artists with more training and experience are not and appear to have lost a sense of adventure. Without those artists holding up their end of the bargain, the young performers, who have brought all their enthusiasm and belief in what they are doing, have been left exposed in a scanty space; a place of limited pace, action, volume, tone, texture, dimension. They have been left in an open white sunny disposition backed up by the lighting design that is equally white and sunny. Aspects of the design are unwieldy, in particular the foam props.

The production is touring to Mumbai and although foam does pack down small it doesn't serve the performers. Actors love prop business but the foam gives them nothing substantial to hold onto and actually becomes awkward to handle when it's in the form of a yacht with a tall mast.

The theatrical re-telling does stay true to the children's story. The overall structure of the production has a rambling feeling which gives the impression the work is longer than the forty minute performance. The structure of the play is very close to that of the book but the book utilises the text and illustration to its best advantage. This in itself highlights the difficulties that can arise when adapting an existing work from another source.

A theatrical adaptation needs to be theatre embodying the story as it knows best, rather than telling or even illustrating the story, as both those things can be found between the covers of the book. On a micro level, the production does have funny one-liners, some from the book which have translated really well and others that have obviously emerged through rehearsal, which likewise are funny. The cast has clearly worked on line delivery and when they strike a laugh, their pleasure is contagious.

If theatre is allowed to exist as a medium unto itself, *The Pirates' Ship* does have potential on stage. This production needs to shift from storybook acted out to theatrical adaptation.

The production gave flashes of this: the sea morphing into a dress fitting, not to mention a snatch of a sonorous voice, the ability to embrace character, presence in the moment, tight ensemble work. These are all theatrical ingredients that did appear on stage and do make up good theatre.

As a whole, the production didn't pull together the vital elements to make a good piece of theatre. I wanted it to. I know the effort that has gone into it from the company level to the young peoples' personal investment. In terms of process it appears the young performers have had a really special opportunity to work with Rubinstein's existing text and workshop the story with Monkey Baa. This calibre of interaction between young artists and members of the arts world illustrates the integrity in the aims of the project and likewise in the method.

It is a commendable example to set and may Urban Myth have the opportunity to provide this kind of interaction again. May those in the cast who wish to pursue careers in theatre, do so. In the mean time it is our responsibility as practitioners working in theatre to care and guide the next generation and show the making and performance of quality work to the best of our abilities. ✪

Ursula Beaumont has been involved in youth performing arts for close to two decades. She is currently a freelance writer, director and teacher of circus, performance and physical theatre. On occasion she can be seen performing with acrobatic trio, Grace & Grunt.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Edwin Kemp Attrill and Isabelle Danforth-Smith



Children of the Black Skirt

RealTV

Director Leticia Caceres

Playwright Angela Betzien

Composer Pete Goodwin

Cast Jodie Le Vesconte, Louise Brehmer, Melodie Reynolds

Designer Tanja Beer

Lighting Designer Lisa Milbus

Photographer Stephen Henry

Performance The Sacred Heart Chapel, Collingwood

On a wintry Melbourne night a large crowd gathered to catch one of two return showings of RealTV's successful production, *Children of the Black Skirt*. First performed in 2003, this show has been revised and reworked after extensive touring and critical feedback from teachers, students and artistic colleagues. I am so glad that this Australian theatre for young people company has persisted in showing this work. It is a deeply haunting and carefully constructed piece of theatre written by award winning writer Angela Betzien.

The play opens with the sound of laughing kookaburras; immediately we are in hot, rural Australia. Three girls run onto the stage playing and giggling together. Although it is a lovely scene, the audience is unsettled by an eerie echo; our first hint of the haunting that underlies this new world. The children decide to play dress ups, and when one of the girls zips up her black dress, we are immediately transported to a nightmarish space.

Black Skirt, played by Jodie Le Vesconte, is the haunting figure of this story-book world. She floats around the stage snapping huge black scissors straight from a gothic fairy tale. An enchanting musical score written by Pete Goodwin is filled with spirit voices and chilling sounds. Director Leticia Caceres also uses the silent figure of Black Skirt to insert moments of stillness and heightened suspense.

Towards the end of the play Vesconte plays Harold Horrocks, the grotesque orphanage inspector. This stylised character transformation is highly visible and provides one of many beautiful theatrical moments. Caceres uses this Brechtian technique and multiple characters to continually remind the audience that stories of displacement are prevalent throughout Australian history and are not unique to any one time or place.

We are introduced to many characters in this outback Australian orphanage. Day to day orphanage routines, washing and cleaning rituals and punishments are explored through snapshots and impressions. In one scene a girl is made to keep scrubbing until she has scrubbed off her colour. 'I'm Aboriginal' she protests. Through children's games and role plays we learn of stories which haunt the Australian landscape. Tragic stories of new arrivals are acted out and include tales of murder, transportation and retribution.

Transitions between scenes are seamless. It's almost as if the haunted souls are floating within the landscape, and they come to rest on the actors for a while. Despite the heavy subject matter, scenes are often incredibly funny due to exceptional character acting by Vesconte, Louise Brehmer and Melodie Reynolds. The young adult audience clearly enjoyed the skilled comic timing of the three performers.

RealTV's production is a wonderful example of good storytelling. It manages to be playful, scary, hilarious and thought provoking. We don't know everything about the characters we meet: who they are, where they came from. What makes this play successful is that it provides the bones of the story. It draws from historical events but is not prescriptive. It allows the audience to bring their own fears and imagination to the story while also leaving space for creativity and conversation to continue beyond the walls of the theatre.

Children of the Black Skirt is an eerie reminder of our complex colonial history. The variety of voices heard in the play move the audience outside of a linear history, into a space that is able to be flexible and inclusive. In this play RealTV explore a new space in which to begin the possibility of negotiating colonial trauma.

It is my sincere hope that this important and exploratory work tours for years to come. ★

Sarah Lockwood is a performer, administrator and teaching artist. She recently performed in *Diabolica Jones* at La Mama Theatre and is part of new company Drop Bear Theatre.



Image courtesy of RealTV.
Photo by Stephen Henry



Mr Freezy

Arena Theatre Company & Men of Steel

Presented by Windmill

Creators Hamish Fletcher, Chris Kohn, Tamara Rewse and Sam Routledge

Director Chris Kohn

Performers Phillip McInnes, Tamara Rewse and Sam Routledge

Composer Kelly Ryall

Designer Jonathan Oxlade

Dramaturgy Julianne O'Brien

Mr Freezy tells the epic tale of Scoopy, a young ice cream scoop who lives in an ice-cream van. Scoopy is finding it difficult to learn his trade and wonders if there is more to life than scooping ice cream. The ordinary slips into the extraordinary for Scoopy when his mother is abducted and taken to Prong City. With prompting from Mr Freezy, the van guardian, he takes the long journey to find her, meeting fierce and friendly creatures along the way.

The show begins with a slow, sleepy start, lulling the audience into a false sense of peace and quiet. This is short lived. Once the milkshake flavours are flowing and the ice cream is flying all over the front row of the audience, the crazy antics are in full swing through to the end of the show.

The creative team has successfully fixated on utensils, food and packaging found in ice cream and hot dog vans, creatively transforming inanimate objects into larger than life characters, creating chaos in the process. The idea starts with puppetry and object manipulation which leads to food fights, slapstick, fart jokes and visually clever theatre. An audience member's reaction to a particular slapstick moment by Sam Routledge was, 'He didn't really hurt himself did he?' From a twelve year old, that's high praise indeed!

On the surface the performance looks like an anarchic mess of chaotic crazy nonsense, with food fighting thrown in for good measure. Beneath the smear of donuts and sprinkles is a group of highly skilled performance makers working with great precision both physically and thematically, telling an archetypal tale of adventure, coming of age and becoming an ice cream scoop who really can scoop ice cream!

The classic story structure begins with the introduction of the hero's world, followed by his epic quest and the fulfillment of his journey with the rescue of Mamma and finally the arrival home. A story that is familiar and satisfying with a hint that the *Mr Freezy* adventure may well continue beyond the show. The performers' presentation of the work is focused, cheeky and highly energetic, an absolute pleasure to watch. They move from ice cream van servers to animators of their characters seamlessly and the gibberish with the odd sprinkling of English tells a full story packed with emotion.

Aspects of the performance have been inventively explored, to the end of all possibilities it seems and still the work leaves you wanting more, a pointer to the successful working relationship between creators, director and dramaturge. Paper cups and milkshakes morph into speedway entertainment, hot dog prongs turn evil, potato peelers become thugs and Scrappy the food scoop and his family becomes the Robo-Chicken savior.

Jonathan Oxlade's design is entirely of the world of an ice cream van with a strong hint of nineteen-fifties. The world inside the van successfully depicts a safe warm haven with plenty of room for chaos and mania while the 'outside' spaces are well constructed to depict the harsh, scary places Scoopy encounters on his journey.

Kelly Ryall's music supports the inner and outer worlds and heightens the emotional ride of the story with sparse sound juxtaposed with great crescendos heightening those scary moments. The lighting emphasises both the emotional and physical landscapes with dexterous illumination of space.

The show is for 5-12 year olds. There appeared to be that spread in the audience who thoroughly enjoyed themselves. As soon as liquid started to ooze and food began to fly, the front row of five year olds shuffled forward to the edge of the mats for a better look. There were smatterings of laughter as different moments appealed to different humours. The young audience particularly appreciated the first part of the show with pumps squirting goo and familiar objects doing all manner of socially unacceptable things.

The twelve-year-old desire for a good tale of adventure was fulfilled as the epic of Scoopy swelled to mass proportions. Threads of adult humour were interwoven for the adults in the audience: Mamma popped an aspirin when it all got too much; Scoop witnessed Desiree Potato at the centre of a Romeo and Juliet balcony scene which concluded with the Capulet patriarch coming down on Romeo like a tonne of bricks—with a potato masher of course.

All in all *Mr Freezy* is fun, anarchic, funny, contemporary theatre yet it has a traditional story of loss, bravery, triumph against the odds and attainment of belonging at its core, which the creative team has skillfully interwoven. The mix obviously strikes a chord with the appreciative audience. The aesthetics of the show have a familiar vibe for audiences steeped in a life of electronic media. It is wonderful for a young audience to experience such entertainment live on stage. ★

Ursula Beaumont has been involved in youth performing arts for close to two decades. She is currently a freelance writer, director and teacher of circus, performance and physical theatre. On occasion she can be seen performing with acrobatic trio, Grace & Grunt.

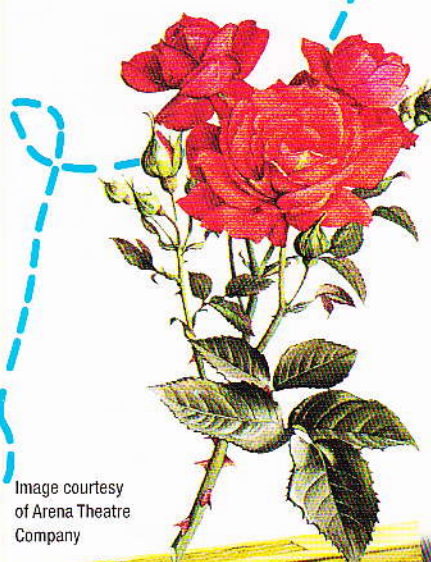


Image courtesy of Arena Theatre Company



Fatty Wombat

Barking Gecko Theatre Company

Writer Justin Cheek

Director Jeremy Rice

Designer Bryan Woltjen

Composer Ash Gibson Greig

Lighting Design Trent Suidgeest

Choreographer Tim Rodgers

Actors Benj D'Addario, Ella Hetherington, Sean Walsh

Barking Gecko Theatre Company's new play, *Fatty Wombat*, developed in consultation with students from Rosalie Primary School, hits the target - yummy, convenient and comforting! In a nutshell, this explains why, as a nation, we've got so overweight and out of shape. Melt in the mouth, bite sized, moorish morsels have turned us all into fatty wombats, watching the telly and stuffing ourselves with conveniently advertised unhealthy food that gives instant gratification and lasting ill effects. We need help! A good shake up to alert us to the need for activity, sensible eating and most importantly, the need to offer support to those who are trying to change their unhealthy habits. With *Fatty Wombat*, Barking Gecko has answered our, perhaps reluctant, cries for help in a really fun way!

Fatty Wombat takes place inside the Pouch Potato Wildlife Park that has closed due to lack of public interest. There are only three animals remaining, Fatty Wombat (Sean Walsh), Pat the Quokka (Benj D'Addario) and Bunji Roo (Ella Hetherington). All the others have been re-homed. The Parks' protective electric fencing keeps the mysterious 'beast' at bay, but the power goes off in three days! What will the three friends do then? Three options - nothing and die, dig a tunnel or go on Fatty Wombat's favourite game show, Natural Selection, and win the diet and habitat of their choice! No prizes for guessing the option the animals go for.



Left to right: Benj D'Addario, Sean Walsh and Ella Hetherington. Photo by Ashley de Prazer.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Director Jeremy Rice keeps the pace going in this slick three hander that had the audience in stitches. Terrific use of a smoke machine disguised what could have been the cumbersome scene change of a large crate arriving, into a sight gag. It was engaging to watch the obstacle course being constructed. From the crates within crates to 'the teeter-totter of death', Bryan Woltjen's set design was a treat, and so were most of the costumes. In particular I liked Fatty Wombat's hood that made great use of the actor's hair to form wombat ears.

Composer, Ash Gibson Greig seems to have had fun with the music including a montage sequence homage to *Flashdance* and a final song that's unashamedly inspired by the classic theme from *Shippy*. Tim Rodgers choreography was a hoot with more '80's inspired flair and just a touch of old school aerobics.

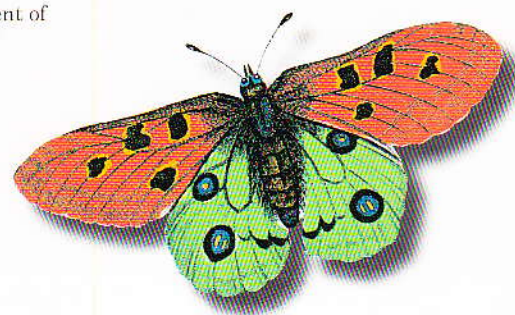
Benj D'Addario was born to play a quokka, especially one as tragic as Pat. Encapsulating a very marsupial physicality laced with just the right amount of dry wit, D'Addario prevents Pat, who was used as a football by yobs and has a real phobia of footwear, from becoming too morose.

Ella Hetherington uses her circus skills to advantage during the obstacle course that forms the central test the animals have to pass to get out of the park. Her impersonation of a stunned 'roo facing on-coming headlights and her fainting are sublime. Sean Walsh keeps the puns and wombat wise cracks rolling. He also proves to be adept at skipping which may put his 'wombat' figure in danger of becoming trim by the end of the season!

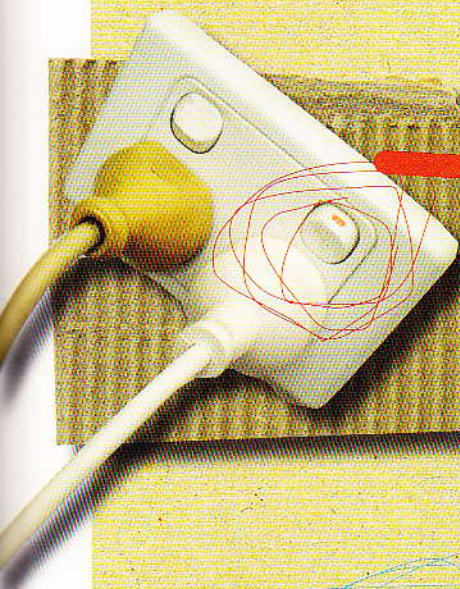
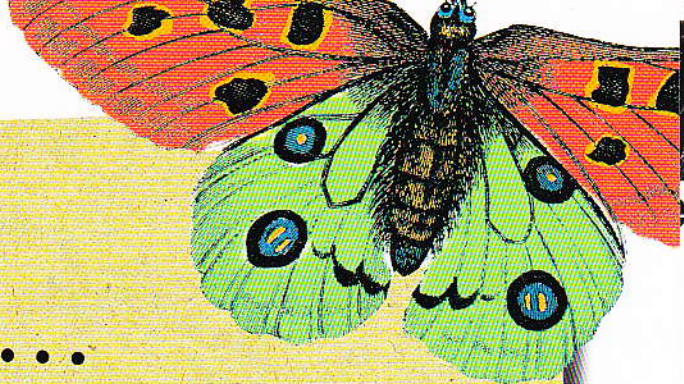
One thing didn't sit well with me, and it was 'the beast'. The perennial scapegoat of the feral cat was used again, but for most of the play 'the beast' sounded like a cow. The kids next to me thought it was a cow. I felt inspired, will agriculture be blamed for removing habitat, I wondered. But the lowing was a ploy to keep the audience guessing what 'the beast' was and justifiable dramatically. What I really didn't get was why 'the beast' took its fashion sense from 'those we don't speak of' in the M-rated film *The Village*? Perhaps the Primary School students involved in the development of the play suggested it?

I was a big fan of Justin Cheek's *The Troll from the Bowl* and *Fatty Wombat* is similar in its delightful use toilet humour. Cheek is very skilful in his references to buttocks, flatulence, and other bodily functions, managing to accomplish these in an inoffensive way. The audience on opening afternoon seemed to share my appreciation. I hope that the too prudish in future audiences won't soil the enjoyment for the rest of us who wish to act our inner child's, if not our chronological age. ★

Shirley Van Sanden is a freelance actor, writer and director with many years' experience in theatre for young people. Shirley believes that you can never have too many shoes or cats.



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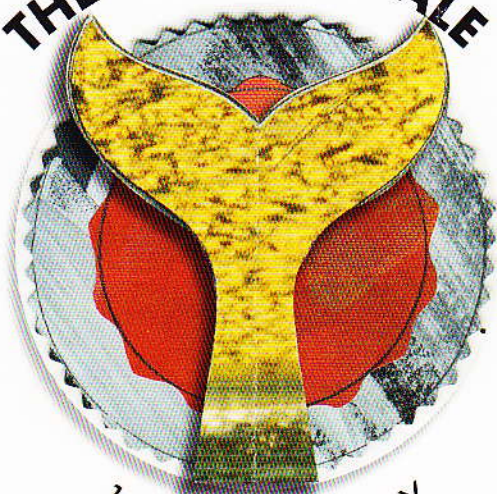
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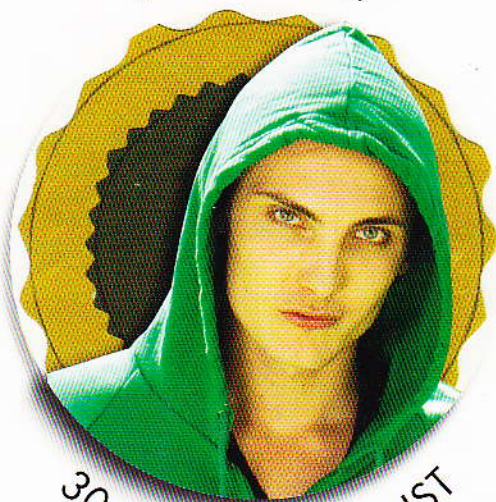
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