

INTERACTIONS, DISTRACTIONS AND ATTRACTIONS

Or exploring what makes good theatre for young people?

By Chris Tugwell.

At the opening session of the recent International Symposium on Theatre Making for Young Audiences in Adelaide, we were presented with the compelling idea that perhaps we should allow our audience the freedom to choose not just what they watch but how they watch it. That as theatre practitioners we should think about the ways that children respond and take in information, and adapt our craft to suit. It was suggested that this is not just the way to go, but the way we must go if we are to act ethically towards our audience.

The suggestion that we might not be making ethical considerations in our theatre practice is guaranteed to make creators of theatre sit up and take notice. As many of us live in a constant state of doubt; questioning the quality of the work, the audience we are reaching, and its value in 21st century culture, we are a soft target.

In re-thinking theatre we are asked to take into account the children who are our audience, to imagine ways that allow for children to discuss, to comment, to get up and walk around. This is presented as a challenge that we must take up and if we don't, we are tired fuddy-duddies clinging to our sad old fashioned black spaces, our seats and lights and who refuse to expand to include this innovation.

It is an elegant lie. It is the kind of tempting lie that makes us stop and think perhaps we have been doing it wrong all these years.

The example most frequently given is that of the football game. This is held up as an example of freedom and participation that is to be applauded and pursued. And certainly it's an event where the audience can yell and scream, can discuss the last goal with their friends right after it's happened, can get up and walk out, can go and get a pie. What is forgotten in this is the fact that a game of football (in all of its codes) has its own very rigid set of rules - rules that are understood by everyone, not just those on the ground, but everyone in the arena - rules that are rigidly enforced. And imposing those rules has a direct and immediate impact on the game, perhaps even

deciding the outcome. Those decisions are the source of vigorous debate among the crowd, and frequently of accusations regarding the umpire's suspect parentage or need for a seeing eye dog.

But the rules of football extend beyond those that apply on the field. There are rules for the audience too. And these rules are also understood by everyone who goes. Admittedly a spectator can move around and comment on the action, but they cannot sit in someone else's seat, they cannot run onto the field and kick the ball, they cannot start barracking for the other team half way through the game (especially when their team is losing) and, while no-one in the arena knows what the outcome will be, the audience has no influence on what happens.

The most they can do is encourage or demoralise (depending on who they're supporting). I am reminded of the story of a Sydney Swans game in which their famous full forward Tony Lockett was playing. Tony is regarded as one of the finest players to pull on a pair of boots. But he was a large man, with a tendency to being overweight. In this particular game all of the action was happening at the other end of the ground and for more than 10 minutes Lockett hadn't so much as run for the ball. Just when the noise of the crowd dropped, one wit supporting the opposing side stood up and made his way up the stairs, turned back and with immaculate timing called out, "I'm just going for a pie Tony, do you want one?"

That unforgettable barb has become part of the folklore of the game; it amused those close enough to hear it, and may have briefly affected the player's performance. But did it change the outcome?

When "participation" is suggested in theatre, we rarely get a concrete example. Just what does it mean?

It seems to be a bit like proposing that from now on we should play soccer with an Australian Rules football; the bounce would be more unpredictable, and therefore more challenging, which would

make for a more interesting game. It may do, but it would also turn it into a totally different game.

This argument seems to make the assumption that all theatre is the same; that it never evolves, and that it is always performed in a darkened space separated from the world.

At the symposium I met a number of people with whom I'd worked in the 1980's. I was reminded of a production in 1987 by Unley Youth Theatre (as it then was) called *Our House*. This was a group

“The suggestion that we might not be making ethical considerations in our theatre practice is guaranteed to make creators of theatre sit up and take notice.”

devised play about a group of young people sharing a house. The difference was that the play was performed in an actual house (in fact, the old house which was the offices of the Youth Theatre) with scenes happening in the living room, bedrooms, kitchen and hallway. At the start of the play, the audience had to decide which room they would go into and at the end of each scene choose whether to stay in that room to see what happened there, or follow a character into another room to see what happened to them, or to go to another room altogether.

However, the play was designed so that it was impossible to go to every room, and see everything. And so, just like life, it was not possible to know everything that happened to every character. Some in the audience developed the strategy of splitting up and comparing notes in between scenes and after the show. Others asked other audience members (complete strangers) what they had seen.

As a result, each audience member came away from that performance with a different story, a different idea of what had happened. Some saw an argument unfold right in front of them, while others overheard it through a closed door. Some didn't even know it had happened.

This changed the audience from a passive group to a group making active choices, and it certainly created a compelling night of theatre.

And while the experience was formed by the choices the audience made, let's not forget, the event was carefully planned and created to work in exactly that way. The outcome was not affected in the slightest by the audience; only their perception of it.

This approach was challenging and original; it broke many of the expected boundaries of theatre; it reshaped the audience, its relationship

to the performance and restructured the form of story-telling.

To achieve this, the production required complex logistics and very lengthy rehearsal and planning. It also required a large cast and a very particular performance space, and the performance space itself limited audience numbers. Also, the subject matter ideally suited this format. It obviously would not work for every subject or in every situation. It can only ever be one option among many.

If we look at the corroboree, for example: that is an event where dances and stories unfold, and therefore is a form of theatre. It is an event where audience becomes performer, and performer becomes audience, where the audience is taught and involved, but where, every now and again a performer takes over the space and tells their story.

It is an event that operates on many levels; where the preparation is as important as the performance, where children may know the steps of a dance, but not the entire meaning or significance of its telling, until they are old enough and regarded as responsible enough to take ownership of that story - which may never happen.

While the corroboree is flexible and inclusive, it still has rules that all who take part understand; children and adults.

We all know theatre can happen anywhere; from puppetry on the beach to mime in the park, from the big top of Cirque du Soleil to the tin shed, from the ancient amphitheatre to the state of the art concert hall, from the living room to the suitcase, from the garden to the desert sand.

But it isn't the venue that is important; it's what unfolds there.

As the ASSITEJ delegates struggled with why we were investigating the question of whether theatre made us more human, it became clear that theatre performs different functions in different places; all of which have an important role. In 1987 Thai delegates told the ASSITEJ conference about the ways they used theatre to teach an illiterate audience the importance of hygiene in the fight against disease. In areas where there was no power, and therefore no radio or television, theatre was the one medium available that could do the job. In 2005 we heard that

theatre is being used in Zambia to teach farmers of the consequences of not honestly weighing their crops. And in Croatia theatre is helping to heal the wounds of civil war by showing audiences we are all the same (Serb, Croat, Bosnian, Muslim, Christian). These are all valuable and vital messages.

“ As the ASSITEJ delegates struggled with why we were investigating the question of whether theatre made us more human, it became clear that theatre performs different functions in different places; all of which have an important role. ”

So we must not dismiss theatre's power to teach as unimportant, but recognise that is not its only role.

In seeing ourselves as "more" human, we must not forget the darker side that also makes us uniquely human; the ability to be cruel, to murder, to rape, to create armies and make war, to bribe, to bully and to steal.

These are, I would guess, not the qualities the organisers had in mind when setting this topic for the day. I think they had a more positive and enhancing image of theatre in mind. But what is wrong with showing the darker side of humanity? What is wrong with confronting audiences with the follies of humanity, the bitterness, the missed opportunities?

Shakespeare and the Greeks understood this. And the power of such works to move an audience cannot and must not be underestimated. The dead speak to us through these plays and tell us that nothing has changed; we are still the same.

To grip and chill our audience is a very special honour, and one we must use with care. By being there the audience has agreed to let you move them in any way you care to. We must treat that permission with respect, but we must never forget that it is our duty to move them. If we fail, we have not completed our part of the bargain.

We must not shy away from this darker side, most

especially when we are making theatre for children.

But by arguing that changing the way an audience interacts will somehow change the emotional experience is missing the point.

It misses the special power of the interaction of actor with audience in the same physical space, the power of eye contact, of breath on body, the power of experiencing through theatre events that they may never have imagined.

This argument ignores theatre's innovators, and also it ignores what is required to innovate; time, money, patience (especially from funding bodies), vision and skill.

The last time ASSITEJ met in Adelaide in 1987 there was one children's theatre company in Korea. In 2005 there are over 100 children's theatre companies performing across Korea. Companies that stay for months at a time in cities around the country, performing to packed houses. In contrast, Australia has fewer companies performing for children than it did back then.

Why is this so? It was suggested that it has to do with a fundamental shift from the so-called "museum form" known as theatre into new technologies that present greater choice and greater freedom; that young people simply don't engage with theatre any more. It seems to make sense; we all see young people at Playstations hour after hour, text-ing each other all day every day. And there is the tempting notion that this generation is finding new ways of being human - creating new networks, new communities. But again it is a false trail. None of this generation has discovered new emotions, merely new ways of expressing them; none has created a new community, it is only that technology expands the reach of what humans have done since prehistory; keep in touch, tell each other stories. There are no new ways of being human, merely new vehicles to be human with.

So is theatre the museum form, as was asserted? If the argument were true, then a nation like Korea (a nation almost as full to the brim with technology as our own) would have experienced a similar drop in interest in theatre, and yet the opposite is the case.

The argument is more complicated than that. Maybe it's because, as was stated, Australians simply don't engage with the arts. They just don't care. So maybe we should all face facts and pack up and go home.

Australians don't engage with the arts? This statement doesn't just fly in the face of the facts, it flies in the face of our own everyday experience

to the contrary. It ignores the Harry Potter phenomenon, the record numbers going to the movies, the spiralling DVD sales, the people who listen to music on their radios all day every day. It fails to take into account the record attendances at events like WOMAD and the numerous arts festivals around the country. It ignores the crowds at Writers Week or at film festivals like Tropfest. It ignores the millions of visitors to art galleries around the country. It ignores the fact that 12 out of the top 17 programs on Australian television (excluding sport) were Australian, it ignores the fact that the arts industry in Australia is bigger than the beer, wine and spirits industries combined, and at over \$30 billion a year is half the size of Australia's banking sector.

Perhaps we should more properly say that Australians don't realise that they engage in the arts. When they hire a video, listen to the "classic nine at nine", turn on McLeod's Daughters or plug in their iPod they are devouring the arts. But it is such a normal part of their lives that it has become, in a sense, invisible.

So why, in such an atmosphere of overwhelming arts consumption has children's theatre suffered a decline?

No one tries to make bad theatre. But in recent years, in Australia at least, there seems to have been a desire to please our audience rather than to challenge them.

We cannot forget that over the last decade and a half there has been a political climate that questions the very need to fund the arts at all. Government pressure to justify its expense of taxpayer dollars on the Arts has squeezed companies between the need to maintain audiences and the desire to satisfy the funding bodies.

Add to this the fact that the buyers of theatre productions are often not the audience itself, but the teachers and parents of the target audience and you have another barrier to producing challenging and even confronting works for children.

The danger in all this is that we forget the origins of theatre and the purpose of theatre; which is to tell stories that our culture believes are important. And to tell them in the most powerful and imaginative way possible; and in a way that moves our audience, and perhaps even presents a view of the world they have never seen before. We must not forget the power of theatre to conjure up a moment or an image that can stay with the audience for the rest of their lives.

As our Zambian delegate aptly stated, "Theatre lives and dies every day." We create it with every

performance and it dies at the end of every show. Theatre only exists when people make it, it only exists in those shared, unique moments between actor and audience. After that, it ceases to exist.

“ Theatre at its best is emotional, it's visceral. Why should we turn away from that immense power?... Unless theatre moves its audience it has failed. That is the only measure. ”

One key delight in that is that when we have experienced it once, we can go back and enjoy that thrill all over again, we can squirm with anticipation of our favourite moment, we can recite the lines with the character, and the play will always end in exactly the same way. There is nothing wrong with this. It is immensely satisfying. We all know of the child who wants the book read to them again and again, and even adults who have watched *Gone with the Wind* 49 times.

Why do they want that same experience over and over? Because, even when we know what is going to happen, we love the way the story unfolds, the delicious fact that the characters never know what is going to happen to them but we do, and where for a moment we are gods who know the future.

A football game can never do this, because the outcome will always be different, the team or the weather will be different, the opposing side or the ground will change. It is a similar, but entirely different event.

We should not confuse the two. A football game is a clearly defined event where none of the participants know the precise outcome. Theatre, whatever form it takes, whatever venue you care to place it in, whatever lighting, music or technology you care to add to it, is also a clearly defined event, but one in which the actors know the outcome, while the audience may not.

Theatre at its best is emotional, it's visceral. Why should we turn away from that immense power?

Maybe the problem is simply that we never explain the rules to the children who take part. Perhaps we need to do more to show them the inner workings of the theatre, explain the reasons behind the rules, show them how the magic is

made, and how they themselves can make that magic. Perhaps, but we shouldn't confuse that with theatre itself.

Theatre is the way it is for a reason. It has been like this for 5,000 years not because it is stuck in some irrational bloody-minded rut, but because the act of telling a story to a group of others works on a fundamental level, and is something we as humans enjoy. From the hunts and battles acted out in the firelight of prehistory to the full 12 hours of the Ring Cycle we like to see stories acted out in front of us.

Above everything else theatre must move us. It should excite and entrance us and it must confront and challenge us, make us gasp with delight, or hurt with laughter. Whatever else it does, it must make us feel. Everything else is irrelevant.

Unless theatre moves its audience it has failed. That is the only measure.

However, the problem we face in 2005 is theatre company budgets that are either the same or less (in real terms) than they were in 1987. This means smaller casts, shorter rehearsal periods and therefore less opportunity to explore and challenge conventions.

It was raised in every discussion group that in Australia there is an almost total reliance on school audiences to keep the box office ticking over, and therefore a growing influence (via board membership and the accreditation of schools productions) over content, where risk is discouraged and controversy avoided.

By contrast children's theatre companies in Korea are not allowed in schools; not because of any prejudice against the arts, but to protect teachers from the need to handle money (and therefore any potential accusations of corruption).

What this does is remove the companies from any requirement to fit in with the curriculum, and releases them to target their audience directly; the children (and their parents).

The result is a diverse array of productions playing to packed houses, with government funding solely based on a subsidy per ticket (and thus removed from the need to make any value judgements).

So perhaps instead of rethinking the paradigms of story-telling as was suggested, we should re-think the paradigms of getting to our audience, and sever the comfortable umbilical cord of the ready-made and captive audience that schools provide, if we are to rediscover the powerful forms of theatre that have been discussed.

“ ... if we want challenging and compelling theatre, [we must] allow the practitioners the freedom to create works without influence or other agendas. ”

To achieve this of course requires the trust and belief of benefactors and funding bodies to allow it, and the desire of companies to take this route. This will require persuasion, cajolery and courage. It will require a shift in political circles to accept the fundamental importance and relevance of theatre. It will also require a vision from us as practitioners, and a unified voice about where we would like theatre to be in five, ten or twenty years, and a plan (dare I say road map?) of how to get there. This plan should also include ways of engaging with the other major players in children's theatre; the politicians, the funding bodies, the teachers, the parents, and yes, even the children, as well as the main stage flagship theatre companies who, as was stated at the symposium, have a clear stake in the success of children's theatre as a source of their future audience, but have yet to realise it.

But at its core such a plan must, if we want challenging and compelling theatre, allow the practitioners the freedom to create works without influence or other agendas.

At the symposium, Dave Brown quoted a delightful poem about the hundred languages of the child. I have taken the liberty of doing a "find & replace" on this poem (below) and changed the word "child" to "artist". Perhaps this will help us begin to rethink how we see the artist in society and the importance of giving artists the space and resources they need to create.

After all, the artist must be the fool in the king's court; allowed to speak what others dare not.

No Way. The Hundred Is There.

The artist
is made of one hundred.
The artist has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking
A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.
The artist has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the artist:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.
They tell the artist:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the artist:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the artist
that the hundred is not there.
The artist says:
No way. The hundred is there.

With apologies to Loris Malaguzzi
(translated by Lella Gandini)