

Machinations, Meanderings and Musings

YPAA's International Symposium on Theatre Making for Young Audiences.

The Common Ground; Cultural Difference, International Symposium on Theatre Making for Young Audiences was convened in March during the SA 2005 Come Out Festival.

Held in the National Wine Centre of Australia, nestled in the leafy surrounds of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, the symposium attracted sixty Australian and international professionals who make theatre for young people to explore the philosophies underpinning their practice.

Hosted by Young People and the Arts Australia (YPAA), the symposium was conceived in response to recommendations from a 2003 landmark review commissioned by the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and policy agency.

The review examined the state of play for professional theatres producing work for young audiences, and included in its recommendations that 'opportunities for interaction and debate between TYP practitioners [should] be encouraged, both within Australia and between Australian practitioners and those abroad'.

Inviting members of the Executive Committee of ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People), who were attending the Come Out Festival, YPAA arranged this international symposium to provide a forum where practitioners could discuss the beliefs supporting their philosophies.

What happens when you bring together a bunch of professionals from around the world who make theatre for young people, and ask them a couple of big questions about the beliefs behind their practice?

A collection of papers from four writers whose brief was to be a 'fly on the wall' and write about these discussions is now available from the website of Young People and the Arts Australia (YPAA). Along with summaries of the panel presentations provided to get discussion fuelled up on the day, these papers offer interesting, eclectic and thought provoking reading.

A summary of the insights provided by the intrepid writers follows below, but first some background... Taking the theme of the 2005 Come Out Festival 'Being Human', theatre professionals from Australia, Brazil, Japan, Korea, Germany, Uganda, Zambia, USA, Turkey, Denmark, Canada, Austria and Sweden, gathered to explore the following set of questions:

Does theatre help humanise us, as individuals and as a society?

In a world of electronic media and virtual entertainment, what does the experience of live theatre bring?

How do these beliefs express themselves in our practice for young audiences?

In pursuit of excellence, what inspires us as practitioners? What makes outstanding work? Are these views global or determined by cultural background?

How can we uphold and articulate these beliefs in our practice?

The day kicked off with four short discussion starter presentations from: Sally Chance, Artistic Director, Come Out Festival; Susan Richer, Artistic Associate, Queensland Performing Arts Trust (previously Artistic Director of Out of the Box Festival of Early Childhood); Dave Brown, Artistic Director, Patch Theatre Company; and Kim Peter Kovac, Director, Youth and Family Programs, The John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

To allow for easy discussion, the remainder of the day was spent in four small groups, with plenary sessions at key points. Each group had a mix of practitioners from Australia and around the world. Each group was also assigned a writer whose brief was to observe the discussion journey and to produce a paper which captured the essence of the discussions in their group.

Writers Anna Held, Stephen House, Sean Riley and Chris Tugwell found this no easy task, with each producing a varied, interesting, sometimes humorous and sometimes cynical look into their experience of the symposium day.

All the discussion starter presentations succeeded in offering a range of simulating and provocative ideas for delegates to start 'chewing over'.

Sean Riley noted of Sally Chance's presentation that she 'opened the door to a space I wished to go; the wonderful world of ambiguity in theatre for young children – the need to present truthful stories and characters, who live in a world full of faults and contradictions'.

Of Susan Richer's challenging and innovative presentation he writes, 'Susan didn't mess about with semantics and cut to the core, [pointing out]...the incredibly low percentage of population attending theatre in Australia; there is no theatrical culture in Australia; it's a risk for families; it's often expensive for the average family; sport does it better; we're taking ourselves too seriously; we're too precious; it's a job; get on with it.'

Chris Tugwell's paper responds strongly to Susan's challenge that we should re-think how we go about making theatre for young audiences. Practitioners should let go of the role of 'expert' and consider what would happen if young audiences were allowed the freedom to choose not just what they watch but the way they watch it.

Chris discusses what he calls the 'elegant lie', that of being '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'. And if we don't he says, 'We are tired old fuddy-duddies clinging to our sad old fashioned black spaces, our seats and lights and who refuse to expand to include this innovation'.

Chris goes on to argue the timeless qualities of spellbinding and memorable theatre, and the need to re-discover and embrace these qualities. '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.'

Stephen House notes a similar discussion in his group, observing that Western culture and a Christian foundation affect what we do as artists and how we make theatre for young people. He writes that 'there was a type of consensus that our culture very much dominates how we approach our creativity, and we should be mindful that our culture is not everyone else's. [However, theatre is]...about the quality of the connection and...there is a powerful desire in humans to be connected, feel connected. [Maybe]...there is a fear in theatre workers of audience interactivity, a fear that the

large and slightly daunting questions or challenges, we search for shelter in the trivial.'

Sean Riley also noted this tendency but saw the need to shelter in the trivial as, 'the voices of the besieged – that horrible hurdle we all have to jump before anyone else gets a word in – lack of funds; sport versus arts; touring in schools and how difficult it is; lack of funds; the evil emphasis on success; how do we get the audiences there? Lack Of Funds! Yes, I suppose these sobering and cruel fates humanise us.'

Stephen House concluded that theatre makers for young people are passionate about what they do, aware of the restraints and benefits that Western culture places upon their work, committed to professionalism and high quality outcomes, and conscious, respectful and very mindful of the benefits that theatre offers for young people.

He goes on to write that 'as a theatre artist myself, who has worked mainly in professional adult theatre and now more and more in the area of theatre for young people,

Does theatre help humanise us, as individuals and as a society? In a world of electronic media and virtual entertainment, what does the experience of live theatre bring? How do these beliefs express themselves in our practice for young audiences? In pursuit of excellence, what inspires us as practitioners? What makes outstanding work? Are these views global or determined by cultural background? How can we uphold and articulate these beliefs in our practice?

theatre moment will be broken. Are there other ways to get audiences involved? Are we undervaluing the place of stage and audience, the tradition of theatre and overvaluing the audience interaction?'

The need for theatre to make us feel and that can stimulate our imagination is a theme that comes through all the papers. A passionate debate in Sean's group brought forth what he called some 'good, solid, positive statements', such as:

'Universal principles of good theatre are the creation of work that provokes intellectual, emotional and kinaesthetic responses. Theatre that reflects time and place; that has resonance and speaks to its audience in the way we speak, with all our mistakes, stammers and ambiguities.'

Anna Held was disappointed that discussions in her group didn't grapple with the question the symposium began with – 'Does theatre humanise us?' 'Perhaps [she writes] there is a fear of considering the option that what we do doesn't humanise our audience, or maybe it is human nature that, when faced with

Anna noted that 'maybe people cannot "just talk" about these issues: they needed to be pushed. Perhaps it takes someone to stir and take an opposing point of view for people to get fired up about these issues and to initiate conversation.'

What would have happened, she mused if the 'speakers told us that theatre did not challenge, inspire or excite and had no humanising effect at all? Would the delegates have fought for their art?' Pointing to the architect Mies van der Rohe's quote, 'God is in the detail', that the great can be found in the small, she says, 'Maybe the question of whether we are humanised by theatre was too broad and generalised. So general that no one could debate – perhaps a more specific question would have prompted larger discussions.'

Sean 'craved for strident voices of the young to pep the day up – and to hear them dream their visions aloud, however impossible or grand, without concerning themselves with the difficulties of realising them'.

one of my greatest realisations which has been substantiated from today is that yes, theatre art does offer so much to young people and their development as human beings. Those who make this theatre are devoted to what they do, and while maybe just a little resistant, are willing to change to achieve best practice.'

All the papers from the symposium are available from the YPAA website at <www.ypaa.net>. They are interesting reading, not because of the answers they provide, but because of the insights they offer and questions they raise.

DEIDRE WILLIAMS
Executive Officer
Young People and the Arts Australia



YPAA is the key membership organisation for professionals in arts practice for, by and with children and young people. It is the national peak body providing a crucial link between members and between the sector and government. YPAA promotes children's participation in the arts as a fundamental recreational right, and to developing their imagination, creativity and individual potential.

P: (08) 8267 1911
F: (08) 8239 0689
E: ypaa@carclew.org.au
Web: www.ypaa.net

