

## **Young People and the Arts: An agenda for change**

**Jennifer Andersen**

Congratulations Sue on such an informative and stirring paper, and also to Currency Press for continuing to commission critical writing about theatre for young people and about the theatre sector more widely.

I would like to pick up on two intersecting issues that Sue raises in this paper. The first is training and the second is value. As Sue has mentioned, professional training for theatre with and for young people is very thin on the ground. Some drama courses include a unit here and there, but if you want to learn how to work in this sector, you basically have to learn on the job. Now, there's nothing wrong with that – in fact, it's essential to a very large degree – but in an era that so values formal qualifications, it's a bit odd that this is one profession where there's virtually none. And that absence says something. It says that, as a society, we think that theatre with and for young people is of so little value that “anyone can do it.”

And as we all know, not everyone can do it.

There are some theatre makers and performers who have a natural affinity for working with children, for sure, but even they appreciate good professional learning opportunities when they are available. And this is why ArtPlay has an artist learning program. (For those of you who are unfamiliar with ArtPlay, it's the City of Melbourne's children's art studio. It's a place where professional artists work alongside children.)

At ArtPlay we know that working with children in the arts is a specialised skill and that for that work to be rigorous, inventive, child-centred and fun, artists need support. They need opportunities to articulate what they do and share that knowledge with each other; they need opportunities to hear directly from children about the things that are important to them; and they need opportunities to throw around new and challenging ideas. They also need a variety of learning experiences – talks, panel, workshops, mentorships, symposia and special interest groups. And although I've been using the word 'artists', these experiences need to be inclusive of anyone working in the arts with children – so the program is open to teachers, parents, arts managers and students. Because, as Sue writes, making quality

theatre with and for young people, and valuing children as cultural citizens is a job for all of us, together.

Professional learning and value intersect in one other way in theatre with and for young people and that's in the way that working with children shapes creative practice. All the time at ArtPlay, artists tell us how their work is changed by their interactions with children. Sometimes it's that in order to share their practice with children, they've had to really break it down, work out what's important and learn how to articulate that to workshop participants. That can give them a real insight into their own creative process. Sometimes it's that a child's unique take on an idea has fired their imagination and taken their work in a new direction. Sometimes, it's freed them up to experiment, make mistakes, play and make fools of themselves. But whatever the journey they've been on, they've also been learning something valuable about children: that they are diverse, creative, complex, capable people. And in a culture that does not highly and consistently value children's contribution to society, the value of theatre with and for young people is that it can shine a spotlight on this one important fact.

To finish, I'd like to make one probably self-evident point but, given the consistent erosion of funding to youth arts over the past few decades, it's one that bears mentioning. Training artists to make quality theatre with and for young people takes time and costs money. Involving children in meaningful ways in the development and delivery of that theatre also tends to take time and costs money. Artists need far more properly paid opportunities to make and deliver their work, so they can become better at what they do, and we need to offer them many more affordable professional learning opportunities. This is not just because it would be good for artists, although that's a pretty good reason. It's because it will result in better outcomes for children.

It's essential and fantastic that we have articulate and passionate advocates for children's cultural and civic rights like Sue and the other panel members here, but it's not just up to them. One important way that we, as a society - as individuals and through our governments - can show that we value children's culture is by paying for it.