

Matt Kelly – The Listies

Hi everyone, My name's Matt, and I'm a professional idiot. I've been making work for 20 years now, which is very confronting to someone who perceives themselves as still charmingly youthful. The stuff that I do comes mainly from the entertainment end of the spectrum, although if anyone here is from OZCO, it's a highly reflexive practice which examines the intersection of youth culture and poo emojis. As such, I've been thinking about Sue's question about the child as a cultural citizen in the context of my work. In particular, I've been thinking that if we consider a kid as cultural a citizen, then that citizen no doubt has some rights.

As Sue mentioned in her paper, children are largely powerless in the decision-making process in deciding what shows they're going to see. Then once they're at the show, if they're not enjoying the work, they're trapped. But, as no doubt everyone here knows all too well, this does not mean they *will* give their attention — in fact, the one thing they do have power over at that moment is their engagement. I once saw a sold-out Scoobie-Doo show where the kids were so ratty and rowdy that the tech just turned up the volume to compete. Typically, those kinds of shows are so automated that they roll on regardless of how anyone—audience or performer—feels about the experience, so maybe turning up the volume was the only thing that could be done on that occasion.

I think kids have the right to have their attention earned, not taken for granted. Given they were dragged to a show with very little say, I wonder: do they have the right to express their contempt for the show in whatever ways they have available? Should we see them as Tiny Cameron Woodheads, squirming in their seats and shouting out their one-star, poop-emoji reviews in real time? To that, I would probably add: is it OK for ushers to ask bored kids to sit down & shut up? Or is it OK for parents to refuse to let them play on a phone if the show's lost their interest? Is there a way to channel this honest, uncensored feedback into the creative process?

Personally, it took me a while to learn to be *grateful* for the almost constant reviews that we get performing for children. In valuing their contribution, in listening to them, I learned how to make our shows better; and thankfully, my amazing partner-in-crime at the Listies, Rich, feels exactly the same. If the audience doesn't like a sketch, it's gone. If a joke falls flat, it's gone. Nothing motivates a creator more to make a better show than the brutally honest reviews of 450 bored school-kids in Bathurst.

And what does a five-star review look like? Rainbow-rocketship-two-girls-dancing-unicorn-shooting-star reviews are just as loud, and just as rowdy as the terrible ones; and offered with unselfconscious, unashamed enthusiasm. Deep, unblinking engagement, yells of "he's behind you" at just the wrong moment, kids storming to stage to volunteer, and acting out their favourite bits in the foyer afterwards. It's knowing that their minds have been blown. BTW, if anyone knows how to get these kinds of reviews every single show, you can email me at matt-at-crying-in-the-dressing-room-dot-com.

So when, in those miraculous moments we do earn their attention, what else do we owe them as cultural citizens? Kids have the right to have what they find entertaining taken seriously and treated with respect: Indecipherable Japanese animations, Elmo's World Tour, the Millionth-Story Treehouse, fart jokes, Angelina Ballerina, and the Youtube video of people spinning fidgets all receive the same critical attention from adults — written off with the comment 'well, the kids liked it' as the beginning and end of analysis. Do kids have the right to critical readings of their entertainment? What did they like? Why did they like it? How much did they like it? And what are they learning from it? What lessons are they getting from the roles they witness, what value do they get from the 45-minute interval used to increase merch sales? Kids have the right to serious, critical readings of their entertainment: I'm not calling for feminist and queer readings of *Peppa Pig* or Thomas the Tank Engine, but — no, actually, I am! That would be really cool. As an aside, anyone who hasn't read Helen Razer's review of *Barbie the Musical* is absolutely in for a treat—it is hilarious, true and kind of cathartic.

Most of all, kids — and parents — have a right to the gratitude of performers and makers: we all, hopefully, feel indebted to these tiny humans, especially when they take the risk of a new experience in going to see a live show. We should feel obliged to respect that by giving them shows that respond and adapt to their spontaneous, candid, sometimes ego-damaging criticism, and take what they love seriously.

I had intended to end on a joke but struggled to come up with that was appropriate, so I did what I always do when I'm scratching my head: I turned to my 9 year old friend Scout. This is what we came up with:

What do you call an eggplant who won't stop crying? A blubberganoush.