

DON'T STRAY FROM THE PATH

Keynote Address – Sue Giles

Launch of Platform Paper 54 'Young People And The Arts: An agenda for change'

In the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood is sent off on her task to bring her grandma a basket of goodies. Don't stray from the path is her mother's injunction to keep her safe. In tales and stories forever, the child's action to leave the well-known track leads to adventure: danger, death, new acquaintance, tests and ultimately, a new beginning or great fortune. Whether through ignorance, stubbornness, rebellion or innocence, the moment of stepping off the track is the beginning of something. It is the moment of change, the turning point, when everything will now be different. What would that story be if Little Red did the right thing and remained obediently on the path?

The path is useful as well. It means safety. If you already know where the path leads then the journey is linear and predictable, from A to B, without the unexpected. Most of us crave this sort of comfortable routine at some stage in our lives. Many operate entirely in this fashion and regard the cracks in the pavement that might trip as a matter for blame and accusation.

If you stay on the path but are not sure where it leads, it can mean remaining true to what you intend, to the purpose of the journey, and having the fortitude to continue one line of discovery, ready for what may lie over the next rise. When the path disappears, you need the confidence and sometimes the sheer cheek to forge a new one. Then you might discover that safety is not the best reason to create a path in the first place, that a path can be entertaining and absurd, take you places in circuitous ways where the landscape changes constantly.

I often talk about desire line – the concept of a path created by expedience by people moving through public space that is not the one prescribed by authority. In the adult world we can see the desire line everywhere – the trodden track that cuts a corner, that ignores steps, that flattens bushes, in an attempt to get more directly and quickly from A to B. Designers of public space ignore desire lines at their peril. The child's version of this is quite different. Walking in a straight line is not a popular occupation for kids, they'll do anything else in preference: walk on a wall, hop skip and jump, hang on hand twirl, walk on a wall,

watch their shadows, dash off into another direction. A child will explore as they go as part of the journey and with all senses – the journey's end is not the most vital part. Children don't end things like adults do. They don't find closure important in play; instead the continuing story can go on for weeks, getting more and more complex, developing further and into more impossible areas. Impossibility is not a problem either. Children's divergent thinking allows for the exploration of a hundred solutions at once; a spray of ideas that much more quickly gets to the heart of the matter.

However childhood, and our relationship with young people from birth to when we consider them adults, is overwatched and prescribed. The warnings Don't Stray from the Path come thick and fast and not just because it might be dangerous, even though this age of litigation has made us more risk adverse than ever before. We are driven by fear marketing and the conservatism that comes from fear is something we know very well indeed.

There are a million every day examples of how our safe, protected society strives to avoid any danger or change. Stay safe! is how we part from people. Have a happy and safe holiday is written in greeting cards. A preoccupation with safety keeps people on a path that is every day becoming harder to negotiate because the cracks are getting bigger and we can't ignore them. These cracks in the pavement are the things that make someone's life more uncomfortable, that forces someone to look at an unpleasant truth, or see something from a different perspective; things that divide people or force people to debate and discuss.

I'm not an enemy of safety but I am an enemy of safety that masks control and an enemy of safety that denies compassion or inclusion, experiment, exploration, adventure and perhaps simply a scratched knee. Lenore Skenazy was the originator of the free range kid movement in the USA back in the day. She let her 9 year old son, at his request, go home from school by himself on the subway. Her blog about it received trolling beyond belief and she was heralded on tv as America's Worst Mom. Lenore grabbed the opportunity and set off on a campaign trail of exposing the commercial manipulation behind safety in a real attempt to speak up for the independence and capability of children, something that is still an issue today. Lenore urged simple shifts in perception, gave ideas for simple actions that children could do - like saying hello to everyone on their street, challenging stranger danger by making everyone a friend. How do we change in real terms a worldwide culture of fear and mistrust?

Change brings us to the crossroads of the path and a place of choice, whether we want to make a choice or not. The mere fact of another option opens up the landscape inevitably and with potential danger. Our adult fear of change means we are keep things the same for the sake of it, because they work best for us and never mind the rest. The trouble with this comfortable view is that for so many, things are not working. This is true in institutions, in politics, in religion, in the law, and its true for the arts. The Australian Theatre Forum in October 2017 in Adelaide was extraordinary in that there was significant change in the conversation because it was deliberately inclusive. It was uncomfortable – a word used again and again after conversations and during keynotes. It was prickly, challenging, defensive, strident, courageous, stimulating. It was everything the arts should be doing.

These are fascinating times: the pulling apart of models (of behaviour, work, relationships, sexual identity, government) is happening visibly in front of us across the world, falling into complexity and puzzlement, where hurt is closer to the surface, and we are aware of a thousand compelling narratives that were not visible before. The ones who are protesting the shifts and the ‘uncomfortable feelings’ are those who have a position to keep safe; a reality to hold onto because it works well for them.

What I admire about the arts is the ability to think outside of what is happening and to find what is possible. I admire the ability to see what’s wrong and to try to shout about it in ways that draw in rather than keep at a distance; the ability to entertain and expose and in TYA especially, the ability to deeply understand your audience and create the works that communicate with more than one sort of intelligence.

Three days ago I was in Germany with the ASSITEJ International Executive Committee. ASSITEJ is the global association of practitioners in theatre for, with and by young people. This is a beautiful bunch of people – warm, funny, compassionate, driven, dedicated to the arts for children and young people in a landscape that offers very few rewards. It was the opening of the Panoptikum festival in Nuremberg – a festival of children’s theatre - and there were no children present. Not one. Even in our sector, we often make a deliberate separation between children as receivers and children as participants because there a real fear that if we involve children in our ceremony and processes, our important work will not be taken so seriously. The capacity of children and young people to make a valuable contribution is judged by the concrete rules of a model we cling to. Look at this occasion for

example: I'm standing here reading a speech about the importance of straying off the path and I'm firmly on it.

In the contemplation of this launch, the alternatives to the path were there – lurking like wolves in the forest. The quickest easiest way in the time we had to organise was to do it the way we always do and inviting some young people to speak is the only step in a new direction. We could have done this completely differently, and the only risk that we would have taken was that adults might have felt uncomfortable and that it was not taken as a serious occasion.

If Little Red Riding Hood had not stepped off the path, the story would have been very short and safe. There would not have been any darkness or danger, no huge eyes no teeth no strangeness or death and no new beginnings. The child in the story deals with it all, with insight, courage and guts. The capacity of children to change our rules and our models and our world is very real because they are not so in love with the safe path.

And as a last thing – can you all close your eyes and listen to these young people **CHANGE**.

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