

A place at the table
Sue Giles – Keynote Address
Young People and The Arts – Wed 30 May 2018

I wish to acknowledge the acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as the traditional custodians of this place we gather on today and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait people here today.

We're in Cameroon, Africa in a little village outside of Yaounde, in a crazy rat-eaten concrete hall with holes in the walls, watching two clowns from Benin perform on a makeshift riser for a crowd of primary school students. These kids have never seen theatre before and they are entranced, galvanised, beside themselves, literally throwing themselves backwards in an ecstasy of delight.

We're in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where a huge audience of mostly adults is watching a boatload of very young children and their parents being tossed on a silken sea. The atmosphere is electric, emotional. They have never seen children's theatre before and they love it.

We're in Moree, NSW, watching the faces of two tough little boys light up as they recognise their voices on the radio blaring from a car parked on the perimeter of the Boomerangs home ground. They were interviewed 5 minutes ago and now they're on the radio, with everyone listening. The transformation from wary tough nut to awestruck, happy child is excellent.

And then a day ago I was at a meeting talking about our company and all the brilliant and amazing things we do, to someone who didn't seem to care one little bit. It was entirely disconcerting. At one point we halted in a discourse around advocacy, to explain why it might be important to have advocacy for young people and the arts, and it was a sudden shock to remember how utterly I am immersed in this world of young people and theatre and how utterly this person wasn't.

My strongest feelings afterwards were depression and frustration – why do we have to prove again and again the value of what we do? Why don't people get it? How can they not know what we do and how important it is?

We didn't even share a language for what we thought was important.

When you don't even share a language around the work, how can you communicate to those who have power, the importance of support or recognition? If the words you say mean nothing to those hearing them, how can you make your argument? And if what you're trying to do doesn't mean anything to the adults in charge of children - why should they bring them to the theatre?

I have spent most of my working life creating theatre for children under 12. I know that many of you here make work with, for and by young people and are committed to Youth Arts and that Youth arts companies have been leaders in advocacy for the national sector, after it was so bludgeoned by the funding cuts. The platform paper I've written is the third in a run numbering 54, that has dealt specifically with Young People and the Arts, the others, PP 26 by Lenine Bourke and Mary Ann Hunter "not just an audience" and PP 41 by Meg Upton with Naomi Edwards 'Education and the Arts' and now this one, number 54, Young people and the Arts: agenda for change. This was a collaborative effort in many ways – I relied on the knowledge and perspectives of colleagues to shape the picture of Australian practice and to give me insight into the kind of thinking and vision that lies at the heart of so much good work. It was perhaps the most gut-churning experience of my life writing it but it was impossible not to accept the challenge, because people don't know what we do and we struggle for recognition.

The issue of value is not one that discriminates between ages in young people and the arts – the lumping together of young people as 'not yet adults' and therefore not yet valid, denies this vital sector, and the people we make the work with and for, a place at the table time and time again.

So who is here today? Let's see a map of the sector here – those who work in youth theatre please stand? Those who make children's theatre? teachers? parents? carers? children? young people? Presenters of children's theatre? arts organisations? theatre companies? independent artists? People who don't work with young people and the arts at all? people who don't work in the arts at all?

Our unique sector has a very interesting conundrum at the heart of it; we make work for young people and yet the adult is always present.

The adult as parent, carer or teacher, the gatekeeper to access to the work, the adult as audience, watcher, critic, interpreter, mediator: the companion to the intended audience for the work and the adult as creator of work for or with the child. The child cannot remain invisible and powerless in this equation, and yet they almost always are because the portal to the arts is controlled by adults. Freedom of choice is not a possibility if the options are not within reach.

No one knows our audiences like the young people and the arts sector knows their audiences. No one has studied their audiences like we have, shaped work for particular ages and abilities, listened to or collaborated with audiences like we do. But have we ever taken into consideration or fully utilised the relationship of the adults to our intended audience?

The powerlessness of young people in this mix is part of our sector's fascinating and frustrating struggle for recognition. We have audiences who in the vast majority are not empowered to make the decisions that lead to an arts experience, or be independent, or have a voice in what affects them. They are not empowered culturally. The relationship between adults and children is vital because that relationship is the one thing that will either enable or prevent access to the arts. Not just parents and carers and teachers, but

adults who make the decisions about funding, about curriculum, about time, about transport and services.

Recently Arts Front held a symposium in Brisbane to start work around a cultural framework that could be upheld by any government, whoever happens to be in power. We were working on a human rights basis, drawing on the various declarations before the UN and importantly, guided by the Declaration of the rights of Indigenous people. Included in the mix was of course the declaration of the rights of the child, now established as the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the CRC.

Now we all quote Article 31 of the CRC as a justification for our sector around the world.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has written it as thus: The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

but there is an important second part to the article.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

This is good – this gives us all leverage.. It's written down and can be quoted. Shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities. I can send you the link.

There are interesting and disturbing anomalies though. When you look up the convention of the rights of the child on the UNICEF website you are quickly directed to the simplified "child friendly" version which states: *Children have the right to relax, play and to join in a wide range of leisure activities.*

No mention of arts or culture anywhere.. As Lenine Bourke said, does this just mean kids have the right to nap? Are the concepts of arts and culture too difficult for a child friendly version of the CRC? Where now is the power of our one weapon Article 31? Can it be that Arts and Culture is reduced to a 'wide range of leisure activities'? Is walking the dog on a par with watching a show that is deliberately and lovingly created to delight and move?

For those of us who know how much can be transformed, achieved, changed and opened up through the arts, specifically through performance, this negligent attitude is worrying. Someone may be able to argue that the intention is there, but the words are very, very important. and we need to be able to go into more detail than the words arts and culture – =that doesn't say anything. we need details – what does that look like?

Roberto Frabetti of la Baracca in Bologna, Italy has created 18 principles based on the simple statement of Article 31. 18 ways of understanding what 'the rights to arts and culture' mean, through simple examples that are about everyday access and experience. Because most people have a problematic relationship to Arts and Culture, they don't realise how often they encounter it, every day.

What does it mean in your own practice? What can you explain to those who don't know, what an arts experience feels like? and why it is vital for children and young people to be part of this? Things are happening, changes are being made, things are in flux – it's a great time to keep pushing, needling away, introducing others to the world we love so much.

The last thing I want to say is this: "Informal boosterism". How fun is that phrase? I think to most people advocacy sounds like hard work. What I want to stress is that everyday there is the chance to wedge the door to understanding open a little, through telling your own stories but also those of others. Try a little informal boosterism to help those who do have the energy or desire to be more involved, and maybe we will all find ourselves an expected guest at the table.

Expectations around the practice of theatre for young audiences are the currents that sway us all. It is around expectations that we find ourselves trying to navigate the value of what we do and the audiences we do it for.

We have great expectations of our own work: that its effect is long lasting, that it is powerful or hilarious or moving, that it becomes immensely popular, that it has critical success, that it find a buyer, proves itself in the market place, makes us a living. How low or high are those expectations? How often are our expectations met? What will we do in order to survive?

As artists and makers, producers and administrators we understand the precarious nature of the arts generally as a career and the lengths to which we will go to realise our obsessions. In theatre for with and by young people we have reached dizzying heights of obsession. Why else would we continue when there is such fitful interest and support and we are faced with a constant struggle to gain respect for our audience? Survival as an artist is difficult. Of course people look for the quick selling work that can be created without too much effort - making work for children is easy isn't it?

“There are too few producers who are as interested in what's on stage as they are in bums on seats, and there's a problem when artistic content is secondary to the title. Call something *Wind in the Willows* and do it with three actors and a ferret and they will come..”
“ David Wood

The expectations that shape the systems we work within come from the buyers – both those who buy the theatre works and those who buy tickets. In both cases, children are not involved. For the buyer of the work the nature of the work that will find an audience is often very prescribed. Easily recognised, popular, an adaptation of a book perhaps, perhaps with a well-known actor, not too controversial, lots of colour and movement, funny or at least entertaining. In this country, the cast needs to be smallish unless it's a blockbuster in which case it's another matter entirely.

The buyer of tickets makes a decision for the children in their care, whether a school load or a family, and makes that decision based on their own taste and judgement as well as their knowledge of their children. They may also make that decision based on what they think their children need to know or should be exposed to. Their expectations of what is in store are coloured by these things but are removed somewhat, are less important in the decision,

because they are not directly affected. After all, the performance is not for them, it's for the children.

the rights of the child

