

'Young People and the Arts'
Wed 30 May @ ATYP
Panel Provocation: Whose Theatre is it Anyway?
Amy Matthews, Riverside Theatres

To answer this question as someone who does not make theatre, I have to change it slightly and instead ask myself- who am I programming for?

Presenters often get a bad rap. We're seen as the gatekeepers, the money-grabbers, the bargainers. We're the ones trying to squeeze that last buck out of the struggling artists to make the bottom line look better. The big bad wolves. The trolls on the bridge. 'Big Pharma'.

I see it a little differently. We are not the gatekeepers, we are the enablers, the door openers. We're the subsidisers, the supporters. This year alone, my venue will see around 40 unique productions specifically for children and young people come through our doors. This does not include commercial work- this is all from theatre companies small to major- from the simple but deep engagement of Playback Theatre Sydney to glitz and glamour of Sydney Theatre Company and everything in between. We work on scale- we want to see these works in our theatre, for our community. We want to give work to those artists who brave the children and young people market and do it well. We love the variety this scale offers us- the different points of access. We want to cover as broad a range of our audiences needs and expectations of theatre as possible.

But we DON'T work on quantity over quality. At the heart of everything we program is that need for quality and that desire to program for the young audiences in OUR community. We know our audiences. We know when to push them, and when not to push them too far. We cater for the non-theatre literate, for the first experiences, as well as the seasoned theatre goer. We DO want our audiences to take risks- but acknowledge that sometimes the risk is just getting through the doors at all.

Don't get me wrong, venues have a lot to overcome. I'd love to say yes to every quality pitch that comes into my inbox, but we have to stay alive. Sometimes cost is a barrier. Sometimes it's timing. Sometimes it's the rest of the program and the fit with it. But at the heart of every decision- is our children and young people and the magic of that shared experience that theatre offers.

We program for them. We program to ensure that they will walk out of our front door a bit more of a cultural citizen than they were when they came in.

But we do have to get them through that door in the first place. So yes, we use curriculum links and we use tactics to get parents to see the value in something in a language those parents will understand and relate to. And we definitely program productions based on books because there are some really good ones out there. And how good is it, and how much value does it give to us as a sector, when we have teachers and parents begging for tickets to Monkey Baa's *Josephine Loves to Dance* and Shake & Stir's *George's Marvellous Medicine*?

And we think our strategy it works. Our program is growing, and our audiences are growing both bigger and bolder. We are able to program 'riskier' stuff than we used to. Because the more children and young people we can get through that door having an amazing experience, the more value their communities will place on these experiences.

(added later):

We have some very passionate adults (teachers, parents and carers) who are fiercely loyal to our efforts to ensure young people get access to the arts.

How do we use them? How do we see them as partners, not gatekeepers? As door openers, as supporters?

-Amy Matthews, Program Coordinator - Education, Youth and Families, Riverside Theatres, Parramatta.