

Whose theatre is it anyway?
Theatre Network Australia Panel
Australian Theatre for Young People, 30 May 2018



Good afternoon everyone, my name is Sarah Parsons and I am the Creative Producer and CEO of Outback Theatre for Young People, based in Deniliquin, South West NSW and covering a jurisdiction of 30,000 square kilometers of mostly remote and rural towns. I am also a Director on the Board of Regional Arts NSW.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation whose land we meet on, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging for not only the learning and growth happening at this event, but the learning and growth I received in my three and a half years working in this building and on the Eora Nation with ATYP. I also pay my respects to any First Nations people or elders present from other Nations that have traveled to be here today. I also pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging in all of the nations across NSW Outback Theatre lives and works across every day. Always was, always will be.

The value of the arts is something we have talked about endlessly - both monetary and culturally or socially. We are based in low socio-economic areas so don't charge for our programs, and that for us raises questions around value - does not charging for something give it less value? We don't think so, like Sue mentioned in her Platform Paper, we believe that "it allows the social capital argument around the arts to be clearer than the economic. If the work is present in daily life, and can be engaged without financial transaction, it becomes open to all." It then just becomes a matter of getting them off their tractors! I tend to look at what we do as a slow shift towards the increase of the social value of arts in our communities.

Young people are the agents for cultural change in our communities - when given opportunities to lead; we all know the potential they have for absolute greatness. By demonstrating the faith we have in them, by handing over the artistic control and responsibility, we empower these young people with confidence, allowing their communities to see them as drivers of civic engagement, as artists, as connected to their communities and townships, as responsible members of small societies.



We are in the business of shifting an ingrained perception of art in remote and rural Australia - one that art is for a certain kind of person, one that art is unattainable, one that art is expensive and exclusive. None of our high schools have drama teachers; none of our councils have arts and culture policies or arts engagement officers. Theatre is black box seated and is not taken serious if it doesn't come with a meal. Now don't get me wrong, I love a dinner theatre show, and I cut my teeth with the Bathurst Theatre Company doing just that. However, it's slightly limiting for creative expression. For example - when we presented a show on the floor of the halls, in the round, with a square of trestle tables that the action unfolded within, it blew the kids MINDS. And that was pretty standard theatre design, really. But suddenly, you could see a small world of possibility opening up for them. "You mean this can be theatre too?" And I loved Sue's provocation about works playing out in unconventional spaces, works that are part of sports (Polyglot's *First on the Ladder* for example), works that catch that audience slightly unaware, are joyful and participatory, have young people leading and managing, and shifts something in them, something magic. We don't have a theatre or professional venue in all of our 30,000 square kms - so we love unconventional venues - hay sheds, goals, historic homes, showgrounds, and paddocks. It's all part of the fun.

Young people are modeled on the adults around them. For a huge part of their childhood, what they perceive as true is based on the values and opinions of the adults that are raising them and educating them. If those adults don't place a value (socially or culturally) on the arts, those young people won't grow up to value it either. By offering opportunities to engage in artistic programs, ideas for career development, support and knowledge, and allowing young people to engage with leadership and growth roles in the arts, we're trying to shift the thinking. We recently hosted Melbourne-based international touring company One Step at a Time Like This in Deniliquin. Their tour itinerary went Chicago - London - Deniliquin.

They created an audio walking experience with some of our young artists - interviewing them about their perception of Deni, what is what like growing up there and how they felt about the people around them. We then invited their friends and family to walk the streets of the Deni CBD while their children's voices whispered in their ears. Safe to say, everyone learned a lot that day. As Sue said, "The involvement of young people in the art creation can expand an audience's understanding of what the art means". That experience was an incredible device for conversations and openness, all through the medium of art. One of my aims for that project was to give those young people positions of creative leadership on that project, to shift those perceptions of cultural dismissal from our local council and leaders in town. They haven't heard the tracks yet, but I'm remaining hopeful.



I was really inspired by how Adena Jacobs and Fraught Outfit hands over control to her young artists, and I really think that's an exciting model and way forward that we are also trying to emulate. These kids are amazing. It's our job to give them a platform to make their art. As Sue says, show those damn adults what is possible. "Young people are contributors, not recipients". In LIFE, not just art.

The theatre belongs to the empowered young artists.

The world belongs to the empowered young person.

Thank you.

