



Revitalise Platform Paper

Why Theatre?

by John Sheedy

with Jonathan Holloway



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A Playlab Publication

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First Published June 2015 by Playlab

General Editor: Alexander Bayliss
Copy Editor: Siobhan Bayliss
Cover design: Sean Dowling and Ian Lawson

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:
Catalogue in publication
John Sheedy — 1972 —

Revitalise
ISBN: 978 1 925338 22 5

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Introduction

When I was asked to make a key note speech at the Revitalise conference 2014 and write a paper about theatre for children and young people, the first thing I did was ask my friend and colleague Jonathan Holloway (Artistic Director of the Perth International Arts Festival) to join me on the journey. I make work for young people, and lead a great company, but I find writing about it more difficult than talking about it doing it. Between us, Jonathan and I have directed work for and with young people in two hemispheres, and whilst I am now dedicated to directing it and he is dedicated to programming it, we have many similarities and enough differences to make this an interesting process. What follows is a fluid back and forth of our ideas and words. I think Jonathan and I would agree that anything totally controversial was said by the other person, but we shared the writing and thinking around the bits you agree with.

John Sheedy

Foreword

In early 2014, our Industry Partners at Playlab approached Drama Queensland about the possibility of using funding which they had successfully acquired from Arts Queensland, to enable us to bring to Queensland an interstate keynote speaker, whose voice we would want to share, with the vision to digitally publish the transcript to enable increased access across regions and over time. After many conversations, Playlab's CEO and Artistic Director Ian Lawson and I settled on a speaker who was not only active in both the Arts and Education sectors, but who was also very quickly building an excellent reputation for creating high quality, provocative and refreshingly new and now work for young people. That individual, was John Sheedy, the CEO and Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre Company in Western Australia.

Sheedy's training and professional history covers many of the big institutions and companies such as NIDA, Belvoir, Black Swan Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare, Sydney Theatre Company and Griffin and he has won Helpmann and Sydney Theatre Awards. His work at Barking Gecko has seen him undertake some exciting collaborations with John Marsden, Shaun Tan, Kate Miller-Heidke and Opera Australia. However, some of his most imaginative and innovative work is in the verbatim style, in which he fulfills a number of roles including playwright, creator, adaptor and director. For these productions, such as *Driving Into Walls* and *onefivezeroseven*, Sheedy draws directly on interviews taken from teens across Australia, thus honouring their very own voice on stage.

In October 2014 Drama Queensland hosted a special event 'Revitalise' at which Sheedy delivered his keynote address. He effectively aroused the interest of youthful artists, highly experienced teachers, community arts workers and more as he explored the concept 'What's Our New Contract?' as theatre makers and shapers of young people, delved into the realms of WHY we create theatre, WHO we create it for and with, HOW to make it less saccharine, as well as the need for educators and performing arts companies to partner to create work that young people need and deserve. Whether a budding or celebrated theatre practitioner or educator, there will be something to provoke or emote you in this thoughtful and highly relevant keynote, now available to you for free download thanks to Playlab and Arts Queensland, in association with Drama Queensland.

Annette Box
President
Drama Queensland



John Sheedy



John is a multi-award nominated Australian Director whose work has been staged extensively throughout Australia. In 1998, John completed his Bachelor of Dramatic Art at the National Drama School in Melbourne before completing his Masters of Fine Arts (Directing) at National Institute of Dramatic Arts in 2002. In August 2010 John became the Artistic Director at Barking Gecko Theatre Company, delivering his last season for the company in 2015.

John has a notable career working with some of Australia's most respected theatre companies.

For WAAPA John has directed *Richard III*, *Unidentified Human Remains* and *Blood Will Have Blood* (2011). At NIDA John directed Reg Cribb's *The Return*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Who's Afraid of the Working Class*, *Closer*, *Attempts on her Life*, *Hamlet* and *The Greek Trilogy*. For B Sharp, John directed Sarah Kane's play *Blasted* and Lawrence Mooney's *Sink or Swim*. John was Assistant Director on *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* with Neil Armfield at Belvoir Street (2004) and with Julian Meyrick on *Doubt* at the STC (2006). John directed a critically acclaimed sold-out season of Mark Ravenhill's play *Some Explicit Polaroids* at Darlinghurst Theatre and Patricia Cornelius' highly successful play *Love* at B Sharp (2006). *Some Explicit Polaroids* and *Love* were both nominated for Best Independent Production at the 2006 Sydney Theatre Awards. John was Assistant Director to Richard Cottrell on *Ying Tong – A Walk with the Goons* for the Sydney Theatre Company which went on to tour nationally across Australia.

In 2008, 2009 and 2010 John directed the Actors at Work Program for the Bell Shakespeare Company touring extensively to schools across Australia. For Parramatta Riverside, John directed Suzie Miller's *All The Blood And All The Water* and the highly acclaimed *Far Away* for Black Swan Theatre Company before directing the world premiere of the new musical *Risky Lunar Love*, by Luke Milton at Sydney's CarriageWorks. In 2008 John spent two months in New York assisting Edward Albee on a workshop of his new play *Me, Myself And I*, before working with Cicely Berry at the National Theatre in London. For Griffin Stablemates, John directed *Tiger Country* and in 2009 Neil LaBute's *The Distance From Here*. John also collaborated with Ross Mueller on a new production entitled *This Highway Home* with a creative workshop held in 2010.

In his first season as the Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre Company, John wrote for the stage and directed *The Amber Amulet* adapted from Craig Silvey's children's book, which premiered in 2011. In the same year, John directed a stage adaptation of Shaun Tan's children's book *The Red Tree*, which was adapted by John with designer Gypsy Taylor and premiered at Barking Gecko Theatre Company in 2011 and re-produced for the 2012 Perth International Arts Festival. In 2012 he also directed Susie Miller's *Driving Into Walls* for the 2012 Perth International Arts Festival. Following the success of *Driving Into Walls*, the production toured to the Sydney Opera House and Parramatta Riverside Theatre in June 2013. In 2013, John has directed *Hamlet* as part of a multi-year partnership with the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts. In addition he adapted and directed Wolf Erlbruch's children's book *Duck, Death And The Tulip* as part of the 2013 Perth International Arts Festival and directed an adaptation by Tom Holloway of Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy*, as a co-production with the Sydney Theatre Company. In 2014, John Sheedy and playwright Suzie Miller returned to Perth International Arts Festival with a sequel for *Driving Into Walls* called *onefivezeroseven*, whose script was drawn from interviews with teenagers across Australia, and later in the year John directed the NIDA's 2nd year acting students in *The Greeks* and a sold out season of Kate Mulvany's adaptation of Craig Silvey's best-selling novel *Jasper Jones*.

In 2015, John Sheedy adapted and directed *The Rabbits*, a co-production of Opera Australia and Barking Gecko Theatre Company presented by the 2015 Perth International Arts Festival featuring Kate Miller-Heidke. Later this year, *Storm Boy* will be re-touring with the Sydney Theatre Company and *The Rabbits* will be presented at the Melbourne Arts Festival.

Under his direction, Barking Gecko Theatre Company has been nominated for seven Helpmann Awards, including Best Children's Presentation for *The Red Tree* and *Storm Boy*. In 2014, John won Best Director at the Performing Arts WA Awards for *Storm Boy* and *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. He has also been nominated for Best Director at the 2015 Performing Arts WA Awards for *Jasper Jones* and *onefivezeroseven*. In 2015 John delivers his last program as Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre Company.

Revitalise Platform Paper

WHY THEATRE?

Before we discuss theatre for children and young people, let's just recap on the basic question: why theatre? What does it do for us? What should we demand from it?

There are four main areas of theatre: theatre as process, theatre as entertainment, theatre as art and theatre as space for social exploration.

Theatre as process is a wonderful and an extraordinary thing. I started, like so many I know, in youth theatre. For me it was magical and transformative. I learned about confidence and performance, I learnt about storytelling and emotional range and most of all I learnt about social interaction and discipline. My behavior, cognitive capacity, memory and social skills improved dramatically and that would have unquestionably made me a better academic student if it hadn't also distracted me from maths and the other six core competencies (aside from English) in favour of messing about in theatres.

In my first year out of drama school I did what I think of as my fourth year of training, working as a theatre practitioner in "Theatre In Education" situations. Theatre In Health, using theatre and role play to train nurses in dealing with complex physical and mental health care, preparing them for their own, very different type of theatre. Theatre In Prisons, leading Shakespeare workshops with inmates in which everyone wanted to work on the most murderous play they knew (*Macbeth*, obviously) in the most amusing and gory ways they could, and through which they openly explored their own personal experiences of criminality, social boundaries, ambition, bloodlust, the nature of criminality and their stories and weaknesses. Theatre In Education, worked in schools using theatre to unlock issues of bullying, single parent lives, high expectations and the nature of growing up in the 21st century.

Theatre as process focused on the participants and those involved. Now, I'm also sure that the director of my first youth theatre production thought he was making great art and exploring the dark underbelly of *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*, but for me it was all about process.

By theatre as entertainment, I mean that half of the Helpmann Awards ceremony during which my colleagues and I have no idea what is going on and for which I will probably never be given an award, even in error. That two thirds of the theatrical fare in the world which brings pleasure, re-affirms life, satisfies huge audiences. I see none of this as a bad thing, and it plays a huge role in our world and in building audiences.

Theatre as pure art is fairly rare in terms of home-grown talent in Australia, and when it emerges it rapidly boards a plane for Berlin. The visual and image inspired beauty of the theatre made by Barry Kosky, Robert Wilson, James Thierree and Ariane Mnouschkine is as natural to Australia as throwing some foie gras on the barbie, and so it lives where all such strange anomalies live, in the dark recesses of International Arts Festivals. Whilst non-literal circus and dance flourish here, theatre is expected to tell a story, be writer driven and have literal performances at its core. Theatre as pure art shares Mark Rothko's and Georgia O'Keefe's ability to allow us to transcend the day to day, to see the world around us with greater clarity and a changed focus. It short circuits our thought processes and hits us in the very centre of our beings, in a way that is deeply affecting.

The oldest and, arguably, the most important form of theatre in the world is theatre as space for social exploration. This is where, for thousands of years, the community has gathered to watch stories be played out in front of us. It's purpose and form has not changed dramatically since the Ancient Greeks. It is the place where we can work through the unimaginable, and our proxies can stage the unsayable. It is the safe space, limited by time and space, in which pandora's box can be safely opened. From Sophocles and Euripides, through Marlow and Shakespeare to Churchill, Crimp and beyond, playwrights have sliced open society and operated on what they found, they have seen the skull beneath the skin. They've made us laugh, they've surprised and shocked us and they have taken us on epic journeys. They have explored the most difficult and taboo subjects in the most imaginative ways, shown us the most unspeakable acts so that we don't need to experience them for real. They have debated every possible subject matter, shone a spotlight on every corner of society from our leaders to our losers.

In doing this they have allowed us all to think together, experience momentous subjects without having to actually experience them. Many of us will at some time in our lives be touched by murder, incest, betrayal, homicidal feelings, depression, madness, suicide and the supernatural, and seeing *Hamlet* increases our vocabulary around these things, builds our emotional memory bank, allows us to work through our understanding of all of these subjects. The play's the thing, but it is only a play. We should of course be frightened by false fire — that way we know how to react when we approach real fire.

Of course, very little theatre is pure to one of these drivers. *Warhorse* worked because it combined entertainment with message. Our leading theatres flit between these four impetuses in most productions. The starting point for the most entertaining work is often high art, and vice versa. But, these four forms of theatre — theatre as process, entertainment, art and social exploration — can be aimed at any age of audience, but their purpose and outcome are at their most potent when we are working with children and young people.

WHO ARE WE DEALING WITH?

It is too often said that the reason we should make and program work for young people is that they are the audiences of the future, that we are investing in the next generation of theatre-goers, that we need to build a theatre-going habit. It is true that these are all outcomes, but they are by-products of bringing young people to theatre, they are not the primary reason for doing it. The primary reasons for making theatre for young people are the same as for adults, yet distilled, intensified.

The reasons for making theatre for young people is not to create the audiences of the future, but to satisfy the audiences of today. I simply don't accept that an audience of children has less validity or value than an audience of adults. They do have a couple of things against them: they don't vote, which makes them less important to politicians and policy makers. They don't buy as many products, so they are less important to most sponsors. They don't fill out forms or write in the comments section of websites, which screws them with funders and the media. And of course the main difference between adult audiences and audiences of young people is about \$50 per head per show, which makes it pretty tough to square with boards and finance departments. It costs me more with every single stakeholder or supporter to make the case for work for young people than it does work for adults, but the truth is this:

... the impact and benefits of work for young people are multiplied by our ability to provide context, experiences, life lessons, and a reason to be a better person for people at an impressionable age.

I don't, personally, make theatre for young people because they are the audiences of the future. I make it because they are the stakeholders of the future, they are the sponsors of the future, they are the media of the future, they are, in every way, the future. One day, and not in the too distant future, I will be reliant on them to make the world in which I, as an old geezer depend. They will shape the world for my godchildren and great godchildren. The fact that they will be the audiences of the future will be the smallest part of what they are and what we expect from them. They will own and run the world, so anything we can do to help them be better prepared is vital.

All of that is easy to say, but they are also complete fuckers to make work for.

Making work for them is way tougher than making work for adult audiences. They are the most painfully honest audience on the planet. Bore them and you lose them. Patronise them and they'll destroy you. Excite them and they will explode and you have the incredibly tough task of re-gaining their focus. Challenge them and validate them and entrance them and they'll be loyal to you for the rest of their life, or until the very next moment you let them down, whichever comes first.

There is also the responsibility involved in making work for them. You are tampering with innocence. You are treading softly on dreams. You have huge responsibility without any power, which means everything you do is mediated through the gatekeepers and guardians who are — quite rightly — there to protect them.

Seriously, why bother?

Children and young people are the main protagonist of any show we present. Because their reaction will go one way or the other, and that will effect the action in the room and the dialogue afterwards. As adults, whether theatre-makers or the carers of the children, everything we see we feed through the lens of the children in the room. We colour it to our understanding of the situation, and if we are skilled and smart, that will guide us to make appropriate work. But if we are overprotective or make the wrong assumptions we deny the children the quality and depth of experience that they need to build resilience and inform their value system.

Most children and young people see a limited amount of theatre, and so they do not have the ability of the people in this room to walk out of a show and say “that was a shocker, that was badly directed and terribly acted”. They so often just say “I didn’t enjoy that, so theatre is not for me”.

Of course, while we are making work for children and young people, in order to get them to the theatre we have to work through those whose job it to protect and support them.

So often the shock in taboo work starts not with the children or the performers, but with the parents and the teachers. We all remember the verbal chuntering and sudden burst of cleaning up around the room from our mother when, as teenagers, we’d all be sat on the sofa watching a film and slight nudity came on the screen. When we presented *Driving Into Walls* — our first installment of a theatrical trilogy based around interviews and confessions from teenagers in the 2012 Perth International Arts Festival, we had a guaranteed point in the show where 2 or 3 schools would promptly march their protesting students out the theatre and back on the bus. What point could that of been? What on earth happened on that stage to cause such a knee jerk reaction? Kissing and sexuality, oh and lets add underwear into the mix. Apparently, teenagers would never honor their curiosity and desires by stripping down to their bare essentials and explore each other in a lengthy pash off. What was wonderful about these walk outs was that the students who were denied the experience and validation, came back in groups independently of the school not once but twice and Facebooked, blogged and Tweeted their riotous approval.

Teenagers are another ball of wax altogether, but we'll deal with them later.

The job of adult audiences in theatre for young children is not to protect the child or explain the story — that is our job as arts professionals. Their job is a servile one: to drive the real audience to the theatre, to buy it a ticket and some organic confectionary and not get in the way. Of course, if we are doing it right, there is always the outside chance that the chauffer could learn a little something too.

WHAT WE MAKE : CUTTING DOWN ON SUGAR

Given all of that, is it any wonder that too much of what we feed children in theatre has too low a common denominator?

Taste and flavour are less subtly experienced by most children than by most adults. Drive by Hungry Jacks, Subway and Boost Juice and you'll see more young people than you will in, say, your local salad bar.

This is absolutely reflected in our theatre. Too much of what children are fed in theatres is fast food, a sweet or salty confection that gives them a quick hit, fires them up but rapidly leads to a crash and leaving them empty too quickly.

Now, move away from the commercial and the small scale, and the stories which fuel our books and theatre for children and young people have always walked a difficult line, and rightly so.

The starting point for the very best theatrical idea is often a very short story or narrative in which life itself is at stake. The shorter the story the better, the better the story the more compressed are its ideas. This core simplicity leaves room for digressions and diversions, so that we as theatremakers can apply our own watermark to the final work.

I find it most wonderful when I am fascinated by a story, and am then forced to convey both that fascination and the broader history and context. When this goes well I spontaneously unlock what the initial fascination was — so often that delicate point in myself where this story originally snuck in — and then I realise what I want to acknowledge and change. The stronger the spark, the stronger the work, hence it is ideal if life is at stake, even if the audience is mostly children.

Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tales have been translated into more than 125 languages and have become culturally embedded in the West's collective consciousness, readily accessible to children and often their first experience of storytelling. Anderson's tales present lessons of virtue and resilience in the face of adversity. They are educational and entertaining, complex and simple but never dumbed down.

The Brothers Grimm went even further with their tales for children; they taught us that a story could be cruel, lethal and infinitely sad. These old fables all harbor a dark undercurrent that is rarely published today. Wicked stepmothers and poisoned apples, young women locked in towers, little girls breaking and entering, helping themselves to what's on the table, vandalizing the furniture and taking naps in strangers' beds. Ugly stepsisters reducing the adopted sister to house slave. Giants eating little boys, trolls hiding under bridges threatening to eat anything that attempts to cross to greener pastures and ducks being outcast for being different. Young siblings threatened by a cannibalistic witch living deep in the forest in a house constructed of cake and confectionary, who are forced to save their own lives by tricking and murdering her. Stories that are simple and short, but loaded with terrifying circumstances and outcomes, offering the strongest emotional experience. Best of all? Most of the time they were read in bed just before you were about to drift off to sleep, perfectly timed to let these gory little tales settle into your subconscious.

EDUCATION AND PERFORMING ARTS COMPANIES

Creative thinkers make innovative leaders, in all fields. Creativity and the arts are at the heart of all the world's greatest cities, almost all of which have great theatres and arts opportunities.

Whilst some of my best friends are mathematicians, I believe, broadly speaking, that most of us would be happier if we were to find ourselves sat next to a theatre maker at a dinner party than a statistician. I'll also go out on a limb and say that when trying to woo someone, we are more likely to do so to the strains of Beethoven or Bon Iver than Pythagoras or Ben Yandell.

I say this not to diminish the extraordinary role of numbers or the brilliant, lively people who use them, but rather to emphasise the extraordinarily important role that creativity and the arts play in our lives. It is often said that music lessons make children better at maths.

They do, but they also make them better at music, and conversation, and lateral thinking, and pattern recognition, and — dare I say it — at wooing people. Not better than mathematicians I hasten to add, just better than they would be if ... you get my point.

It is a well acknowledged fact that children are born creative. The challenge is not educating them into creativity but ensuring that we don't educate them out of it. Creativity is nurtured in the home, in schools, through play and then work. Einstein said "Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere", and it is this thinking that underlines the essence of creative learning.

Two key facts. Firstly, our education system is still built around the same ten subjects as 150 years ago, around the time of the invention of steam. Many of them stay vital, but the balance of the curriculum does not reflect the shift towards technology and the knowledge economy which is so vital to growth.

Secondly, 20% of the jobs that will be done in five years by people leaving school today haven't even been invented yet, or so a statistician told me, at a dinner party.

Our companies employ the best people, the most creative people, and not always just with a view to the job they are doing immediately. We increasingly have portfolio careers, and flexibility is the essence of personal success.

There was recently a study that said that about one third of arts in schools does more harm than good. Learning the violin from a bad teacher can put a kid off playing music for life. Sitting and reading Shakespeare is terribly dull. It was intended to be lively, inventive — the man invented more than 1,700 new words, so don't tell me it wasn't as modern language as anything at the time — and most of all it was intended to be performed.

1,700 new words.

Just a few are ... advertising ... assassination ... bedroom ... blanket ... champion ... eyeball ... moonbeam ... outbreak ... stealthy ... unreal ... well-read ... lonely ... luggage ... label.

My points about theatre in an education context — and Shakespeare in particular — is firstly the need to make it live. Make it physical. Get it up on its feet.

Secondly, this is way more important than we are giving it credit for. The value of our performing arts companies in the education system is a social one yes, but it is also an economic imperative.

THREE PERTH CASE STUDIES

Now, there are those bucking the trend of sickly sweet theatre, and several of them come from my current hometown. I will be honest and say that I was as surprised as anyone when I woke up one day to discover I was living and making theatre in Perth. I never, as a child, turned to one of my mothers to announce that one day I would be mining at the coalface of art in Perth, the Jewel of the West.

But in Perth I am, and I am proud that the city has produced three of the world's most significant artists working in music, art and narrative for children and young people.

The most obvious, and now the most popular entertainer to come out of Perth is of course Tim Minchin. The musical of *Matilda* has opened up new doors for our industry and for audiences. Born out of the Royal Shakespeare Company it is now a smash hit in London's West End and on Broadway, and saw them have to change the rules of the Olivier Awards to limit how many awards could be given to a single production. It is complex, medium to large scale, sophisticated and deals with dark and difficult subject matter: what it is to be a gifted and excluded child, how difficult it is for a teacher to gain their confidence and the loss of a wife and child, which even Roald Dahl didn't tackle in the original. Of course it also deals with cake, the scourge of television and international shotputting, and it does it all in that most chilling of artistic forms: musical theatre.

What makes this work stand out, and the keystone to its success, is the quality of the music and lyrics. Tim is of course a brilliant and appropriately potty-mouthed comedian for adult audiences, and he softened none of his edges when writing for children. He didn't listen to the worries that the work had too many notes, or too complex words, or too dark themes. He assumed that they, like the people who drove them to the theatre, would get as much as they could and be excited by the pace and depth. How right he was!

Of course Tim himself narrated the short animated film by my second Perth-born creator of complex work for children and young people: Shaun Tan.

Shaun Tan was born to Malaysian parents but raised in Perth, and he has brilliantly circumvented any of the traps laid for makers of work for children and young people. He has written about loneliness and depression in young people through his work. *The Red Tree* is a perfect example of Tan's ability to make emotionally complex themes accessible to young people.

In my opinion, though, after the Oscar-winning *The Lost Thing*, his masterpiece is *The Rabbits*, written with John Marsden. This haunting picture book tells the story of the Marsupials and the Rabbits, two cultures that clash and the colonisation of an indigenous community, it tackles huge themes including the stolen generation. The story presents clear and unsentimental empathy with indigenous cultures and provides a powerful study of a people and a land overwhelmed. But we are left with hope and with the question — what should happen now?

The third case study is Craig Silvey. Like the other two, he approaches the work like it is not for young people. The brilliance of *The Amber Amulet* is that it reads like a children's book but deals with subjects best understood by adults. *Jasper Jones*, on the other hand, is an adult book but deals with adolescence in a way that would make Holden Caulfield's toes curl. Not since Salinger has anyone distilled the teenage experience so exquisitely.

RESILIENCE AND OUTCOMES

What Tim Minchin, Shaun Tan and Craig Silvey have in common is their ability to deal with tough subjects in an engaging way.

One of the key purposes of theatre is for the community to gather together to work through, in the abstract or non-personal, how we feel about and deal with otherwise indigestible subjects: racism ... religion ... paedophilia ... murder. Theatre allows us to experience these things and work them through whilst not in the passion of the real experience of the matter. It makes us stronger it allows us to build arguments and define beliefs. It gives us a safe space to share the experiences that would otherwise do damage. It builds resilience.

This is where we need to send in theatre makers to work like pediatricians:

To re-write the charter and guidance for pediatricians to apply to theatre workers, we need to provide:

- support for healthy and well balanced young people to prevent issues.
- context and recognition for young people who are acutely or chronically suffering.
- support in the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of their parents, in every stage of development — in balance or in conflict.

- reduce risks to healthy life.
- control contagious and dangerous ideas.
- foster healthy lifestyles
- ease the difficulties of children and adolescents.

Our priority areas as theatre-makers also mirror, in a non-clinical way, those of the pediatrician: we need to provide a safe space for young people to deal with:

- bigotry and prejudice
- things that happen to us beyond our control
- our own individuality in all forms
- traits, feelings, tendencies and physicalities which threaten to intensify through life
- the situations we find ourselves in.

Finally, our broader concerns as theatre-makers are almost, word for word, the same as pediatricians (actually I changed the words “children and adolescents” for the word “society”):

... the need to be concerned with the prevention, early detection, and management of other problems that affect our society, including:

- behavioral difficulties
- developmental disorders
- functional problems
- social stresses
- depression or anxiety disorders.

Our job is to develop resilience and health. That is a massive brief, but if we fail it, we have failed.

We are perfectly placed, here in Australia, to be world leaders in this world.

Our current crop of international arts festivals Directors are an international and well-travelled bunch, and one thing they agree on — indeed, arguably the **ONLY** thing they agree on — is that the current stand-up area of Australian arts work is the work for children and young people. Holloway, Sefton, Bertels and Ridge — aside from being a particularly unappealing firm of lawyers — have all gone on record talking about the international quality of Polyglot, Windmill, Barking Gecko, Arena, My Darling Patricia etc etc. This view is shared internationally.

THE WORD TEENAGER NEVER HURT ANYONE

And so we come to The Brilliant, Transitional World Of Teenagers.

Teenagers are a wonderful human innovation. Although they are often dismissed as a cultural invention of the post war years, all the evidence suggests otherwise. As Shakespeare and Virgil made clear in their plots, teenagers are not children or young adults — they are fundamentally different creatures, with a fresh and impetuous approach to the world.

Brain scans of modern teenagers show that during the second decade of life the brain is profoundly restructured into its uniquely complex final form. Admittedly, the teenager's brain can exhibit some quirky behavior during that decade but by its end teenagers have developed formidable powers of problem solving, creativity, self analysis, focus, ambition, communication and social flexibility. So it was the evolution of the teenagers that made us human, made us do all the wonderful things humans can do, and the same remains true today. Far from being an irritating transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, teenagers represent a life-stage unique to our species and absolutely essential for its success.

Teenagers, as we all know, tend to take risks. Parents don't like it, and the authorities don't like it, yet teenagers seem driven to do it all the same. Sometimes, terrible things happen as a result of teenage risk-taking, but very often they don't.

The truth is, though, that all that surrounds teenagers has changed profoundly in the last thirty years. The human mind has only recently had to evolve in a world of speeding cars, sexually transmitted diseases and potent psychoactive chemicals, and it is poorly equipped to cope with them, yet risk taking still serves as an important function. To be successful in life we have to take some risks and adolescence is when we learn what can go wrong, what can go right, and what it feels like to take a risk. Creativity and risk-taking are essential for human success and prosperity. They are not only important in the arts, but also the key to success in science, business and the development of civilized society.

So how do our teenagers of today navigate a world where they can download, upload, tweet, re-tweet, hashtag, snap chat, video chat, like, unlike, snap, edit, share photos, videos, sext, tumble, vine, grind and yo twenty four hours a day? And if that's not enough, our Australian teenagers also have to navigate what I believe is a toxic society, with too much store given to mean spirit, racism, ignorance.

This is a hard thing to say, because people think Australia is doing so well, we've got so much wealth and education, we've got so many opportunities. And that is true; we have many children and families doing well but with the dramatic changes in our society in the last 20 - 30 years (I'm talking big picture here) there are many families who are finding it increasingly difficult with the kinds of demands they have on them. One in two marriages end in divorce, we have nearly a million children in Australia who are only living with one natural parent, often in a blended family situation. 20% of teenagers are dealing with some form of mental illness, which is a staggering statistic, since 1970 the incident of suicide in males between the ages of 15 to 19 has increased four fold, and on any given night in Australia there's something like 26,000 teenagers under the age of 18 who are homeless

So where does theatre fit into all of this ...

Children's theatrical experiences always involve the active participation of adults. On one hand: the artist, who selects what appears on stage and how it appears. On the other: parents, family and teachers, who facilitate the contact of children with the theatre. Finally: organisations and actors who manage or give social recognition to the theatrical experience (critics, schedulers, festival and awards).

Adults have ever diminishing participation in the contemporary screen life (TV, Internet and gaming platforms) of children. Young people tend to choose what to consume directly, with little participation of their families.

These facts are part of a decline in the symbolic effectiveness of both the family and the school as central institutions of modernity, therefore in an era in which adults have abandoned essential tasks; drama possesses a unique value in that it can invoke active presence and convivial relations between adults and children.

Unlike some cultural products for children, or adults taking their place, theatre can offer diverse ways in which adults can be associated with them occupying a significant role in cultural transmission. Adults sharing their own artistic language — when they avoid pamphleteering or didacticism on stage — can help new generations build a symbolic framework. The search for meaning at the theatre becomes privileged, emotional, bodily and convivial.

We need to talk about Darren. We need to talk about Karen. Neither of them has the issues of Kevin, but the complexity of teenagers in the 21st Century is unimaginable to anyone who hasn't been one. The influences are incredible and pervasive. We all had bikes, with which we could cycle too far and on which we risked scuffed knees. The Internet can travel twice around the world before we can get our knee guards on, and is populated by every type of person, good and — mainly — bad. The risks are mental not physical, but no less terrifying for that.

Suzie Miller, a playwright and youth lawyer has been up close and personal not only with teenage criminal clients, but teens all over Australia when we travelled around doing research for *DIW* and *1507* — two plays produced by Barking Gecko Theatre company in collaboration with PIAF. Her take is this:

“In the astonishing teenage period of exponential growth, it is humbling to realise that the teenage psych is at once thoughtful and wise while also being vulnerable and fragile — indeed perhaps because it is thoughtful and wise because of those last two elements!

Having realised that those who trod the path before them do not fully understand the ever-changing digital, fluid, interweaved lives they grapple with, they have reinvented what matters and what impacts upon them. Gone are categories of gender as previous generations defined them, gone are generalist rules about morality, race, working lives, and class — gone too are the deeply held ‘principles’ that previous generations thought were unquestionable.

What replaces these things is an outwardly loud and digitally active teenager who is nevertheless part of a quietly questioning, thoughtful community who while not trusting the world do trust themselves, and while not ever being able to ‘have it all’ know how to self-define. Their lives offer them profound connected-ness and also profound loneliness. They are brave for engaging with this new world, to endeavor to discover solutions to problems that didn’t even exist a decade ago. They must contemplate a life of consultant employment and 70% of the jobs they will work in over the next decades have not yet even been invented!

What extraordinary resources they need to be able to navigate this. When this level of sophistication is revealed and played out alongside their very youthfulness, it is astonishing what we can learn from them. While teens have always had a world and language of their own, it has never been as true as it is now. Australian teenagers ask for wisdom and when they don’t find it from the generations they engage with they discover it online, from each other and in various pockets that are unlikely sources. Never has growth of mind been at such a multi-platformed level and such an accelerated rate”.

One of our jobs is to help young people see good from bad, right from wrong, fake from real.

We have been massively lowballing our ask, and what we should give in return.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DEMAND; WHAT DO WE NEED?

One of the best circus shows I ever saw was *Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper* by Acrobat. The show was a manifesto for a simpler life, made when the Directors of the company, realised that each show they made needed to be larger with higher quality production and more expensive than the previous. They woke up one day and simply said “stop”. The result was four people on stage wearing nothing (in Europe they wore pants!), and performing stripped back circus — literally — that formed the basis of the circus scene in Australia today, the beautiful simplicity of Circa, Dislocate and Casis.

If the majority of children’s theatre in the world adopted the *Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper* approach, it would cease to be visible to the naked eye. So much of it has been reduced to three people onstage using poor-theatre techniques to bring a children’s book to life. The only way to get a large cast and high production values is to create a show called “*Walking With Dorothy’s Thirteen Story Gruffalo*”, by Cirque du Wiggle”.

Too often, work for children and young people is tokenistic within wider programming, and we need to take responsibility for that. Only by making extraordinary and compelling and unmissable theatre can we demand our place on the best stages and therefore create work for the largest possible audience.

We are not ticking a box, we are building a castle.

Building a sandcastle on stage requires far more than sand: children’s dreams blow away with the morning dew, but when we put them on stage they have to seem as light as gossamer, but they need to resist the unpredictable force that is an actor in full flow, and the entirely predictable force that is a stage crew and a tour van at 9pm on a Saturday night. To seem light but be resilient takes resources. Unless you are going to say to Barry Kosky and Baz Luhrman that a few lights, three actors and stock characterisations are all you need to create magic realism, don’t say it to me. That said, if you are going to say it to them, can I watch?

In children’s theatre we have traditionally been humble, we’ve accepted the tennet that doing something is better than doing nothing, that one children’s work on the main stage of a theatre in a year’s worth of provision is enough, that as long as either Christmas or Easter sees a major work for families we are covering it.

That needs to change.

Warmth and generosity is in too short supply in Australia in 2015. We've become mean, and we need a space where we can dream. We need to, for a moment, request change, create change, demand change. We need to explore the possibilities of a better country.

We are the only country in the world which is also an island, and so travel is vitally important, but we have become phobic about it. When we talk about boats arriving, our first association is with illegal immigrants and detention centres. We had a drawing session for children after a performance of *Pondlife McGurk* recently, and children were asked to draw something from the play, which ends at an airport, and a six year old boy drew a plane with flames coming out of it and wrote MH17 on the side.

Our job in theatre for children and young people is to be a force for good, to create the spaces and the works that will allow the emerging generation to do better than we are doing. There has never been a more important time for us to be good at this. The world needs to demand it and we need to supply it. We need a new set of contracts around this, but first we need to think big, dream of a better future and deliver great theatre that contributes to making a better world.

We have not yet succeeded in making the true case for theatre for the young. Whilst people still think of it as a live-space nanny, we have not succeeded. Whilst people believe it is for the sake of the future of the arts, we have not succeeded, and whilst it is something that middle-class parents do out of guilt we have failed dramatically.

Currently we argue convincingly for two types of theatre for children: theatre as process and theatre as entertainment.

Theatre as process is argued in terms of core competencies, skills, curriculum links. Theatre in education, whilst waning somewhat and not well funded, is still argued for by a generation of teachers who experienced it's golden age.

The system is set up to make theatre as entertainment a success: television tie-ins, known names, book adaptations. Familiarity and the ability to give a guaranteed sugar hit will always keep it in the mix.

The challenge we have is to argue theatre as art and theatre as space for social change. Theatre as art actually has the best hit-rate with early years, due to the lack of expectation of verbal element. Polyglot's *How High The Sky*, Arena's *The House Of Dreaming*, *Oogly Boogly* or *Fevered Sleep's Brilliant* all gave visual, sense-stimulating experiences which made everyone glad to be alive and allowed us to see the world in a clearer way. Remembering our childhoods, it

was often the journey into the new space that stayed with us to adulthood. The excitement of walking into the sports arena on a Saturday, knee high to the adults. The smell and light of the swimming baths on our first school trip. The feeling of being lighter than air on a trampoline. Theatre has the ability to level parents and children in the re-experiencing of such moments, and that is surely well worth bottling.

And of course theatre as space for social exploration, which I would argue is the most important of them all.

I don't believe that we have succeeded in making our case strongly enough. We need to re-tell the story, re-frame the argument, we need to be making the point that theatre is the place where people can deeper understand the big subjects about safety, resilience, behavior, the future of society and our understanding of what it is to be the best us we can be. Many things can be taught with a few horror stories and repetition: learning how to brush your teeth, what should go on your plate, to look both ways before crossing the road, not to go with strangers, whether Pluto is a planet this week. These learnings and a million like them are taught brilliantly by parents, teachers and peers.

It is the complex lessons which need us as theatre-makers. How do you deal with loss? Why is it common yet rarely spoken of to be deeply sad? How do we really deal with the existence of bullying, racism, asylum, ebola? Fear of the future and confusion with the present.

We have a duty to do more, and in return we need greater resources with which to do it.

The result? The world becomes more complex by the day, and rules and controls will no longer work. We all need a moral compass, we all need a body of stories which inspire us. We all need the wit to know good from bad, and that is where brilliant stories and imaginative and complex theatre comes in. We have been massively underestimating the job we have to do, and that has to change.

This is not about theatre, it is about the world in which we live, and we need to approach it with the same intensity as the curers of disease do.

Incredibly, we can also provide a million great trips to the theatre on the way to changing the world.