

Behind The Critical Curtain

Children's Theatre Comes of Age: Opinion

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Polyglot's How High the Sky goes out on a limb to create theatre for babies.

Theatre for younger audiences takes centre stage at this year's Melbourne Festival. The idea didn't come out of the blue, it's part of a growing trend. I've reviewed more children's theatre in 2012 than ever before, and from the Arts Centre hosting Slingsby's *Man Covets Bird* to the recent production of *Pinocchio* at the Malthouse, it seems our main stages are falling over themselves to get in on the action.

In highlighting children's theatre, outgoing Festival director Brett Sheehy has drawn attention to its importance. He's eager to pass on his own enthusiasm for theatre, of course, but there's a less altruistic element to his thinking.

Even a cursory inspection of MTC audiences reveals that they're old and getting older and as new head of the company, encouraging younger audiences will be one of Sheehy's biggest challenges. Refreshingly, he has programmed a children's show – Neil Armfield's production of *The Book of Everything* – as part of the 2013 main stage season.

The question of involving the young in theatre has received significant critical and academic attention lately, with the most comprehensive survey of the theatregoing habits of younger Australians, The TheatreSpace Project, delivering its final report in July. It pointed sharply to a gap between aspiration and reality. While an overwhelming 90% of Australians believe that theatre is beneficial to the lives of young people and should be central to their educational experience, it's equally clear that many become disengaged from it.

The reasons for that are complex, but they can be inferred from the answers to a simpler question: what experiences and qualities are shared by the young Australians who do not give up on the theatre?

The study is unequivocal. The single most important predictor of theatrical engagement among the young is a family history of theatregoing, and in the absence of that, "committed teachers play a crucial role in introducing [the young] to theatre and in positively influencing ongoing interest and attendance". If we want to be genuinely inclusive and avoid the bourgeois clubbishness that can afflict theatre audiences, teachers are the key.

It's a truth that Nilaja Sun's one-woman show, *No Child...*, reveals with hilarious and heart-breaking power.

Based on her experience staging a play with marginalised teens in the New York public school system, the piece gives a human face to the cultural and social forces that can exclude students from participating, or even thinking of participating, in theatre, the personal fortitude required for a teacher to overcome them, and the capacity of performance itself to change the way young people think about themselves.

If the idea of human behaviour as performance can be a potent agent for social inclusion, it reaches perhaps its most sophisticated expression in the kind of empowering youth theatre coming out the Low Countries.

We've seen Belgium's Ontroerd Goed here, delivering the lives of the young in their own voices, and this year the Belgian-based CAMPO arts centre and the UK/German theatre outfit Gob Squad bring us *Before Your Very Eyes*, where child actors inside a mirrored box play themselves from the cradle to the grave. I've no doubt it will be revealing.

Closer to home, two exciting Australian companies have been commissioned to present work for the very young. Arena Theatre Company's *The House of Dreams* promises something between a haunted house and a hi-tech interactive playground for 5-8 year olds and their families, while Polyglot Theatre's *How High the Sky* goes out on a limb to



create theatre for babies. With so much focus on the fact that the ability to appreciate theatre is learned, it will be fascinating to see how infants respond to the show, and indeed how the artists have gone about tailoring the experience to them. The program at this year's Melbourne Festival couldn't be a better reflection of the strength and diversity of theatre made for and by the young. It's a timely moment to emphasise the artistic achievement of this often overlooked part of theatre culture, and to insist on its centrality to the continuing viability of the whole art form.