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An Introduction to the Theatre for Young Audience Field for the Curious Ensemble

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One of the most exciting conversations growing from our collaboration with dog & pony, dc is the opportunity to share their innovation with forms of audience interaction. As a small company devoted to this practice, artistically they are truly pioneers in a field that is extremely vital in our work serving young audiences. By partnering with them we gain access to new ideas and innovations around that topic that I have not encountered within our usual circle of collaborators.

In exchange, we offer some expertise in working with young audiences. Through this process I have come to realize that this expertise comes from a body of work that may not be as familiar to artists who have only worked for theatres serving adult audiences. While d&p, dc were more familiar with educational work and the TYA community than many, I realized I did not have a way of orienting them to the field at large.

My own professional journey includes working with several ensembles, most notably SITI and El Tricicle, before creating my own small ensemble theatre, Blue Shift Theatre Ensemble. My interest in TYA grew under their amazing mentorships and friendships, until I ended up in Hawaii as the Artistic Director of the 62 year old Honolulu Theatre for Youth. I love both fields and am delighted I’ve found a way to combine those interests in my professional life.

HTY currently functions artistically as an ensemble of performers, designers and creators who are full time, year round employees and create almost 100% new work each season. Each year we reach an audience of over 100,000 on six islands.

So, here goes...

Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) is a large and vibrant field both globally and in the United States. While there are thousands of companies and artists dedicated to this work, there are nearly as many shapes, sizes, models and philosophies for creating TYA work. As an introduction to the field I have attempted to reflect on some things that might be useful for those new to the TYA field and provide links to resources for more information. I’ve limited these to simple lists of fives (to keep from launching into longish rants or too much detail).

**Five common production models that produce TYA work**

1) Regional and independent TYA companies. These theatrical institutions (often with physical buildings) are dedicated to only doing this type of work. They range in size from some of the largest theatres in the US to small institutions. Many have resident ensembles. Most of these theatres produce shows for both public audiences and school audiences (who are bussed to the theatre during the school day).

2) TYA as a programming stream at an “adult” theatre. Many adult companies started a TYA season or tour as part of their outreach into their communities. The best of these have used their standing to innovate and push the field. A criticism of this model, is that these programs rarely get the full support of the Mainstage “adult” work but there are notable and exciting exceptions to that rule.
Programming that is “family friendly” within an adult season. Many theatres program Holiday shows or summer shows and as most traditional theatres are looking for younger audiences we see this expanding.

Touring groups. These range from extremely high end companies that play across the world’s best venues and festivals to organizations that travel directly into schools and perform in cafeterias and gyms. Many groups in the United States do both types of tours.

Specialty groups. There are groups that perform for audiences with disabilities, only for preschool audiences, create large-scale works mixing adult professionals and children. Many of these groups are either ensembles or connected to educational or outreach work.

Five core ideas essential to my understanding of Theatre for Young Audiences

1) The ONLY thing that defines TYA work is that young people are part of the audience. Most TYA companies believe that by getting specific about their audience they can create better, more meaningful work for that specific community. Just as a company might choose to serve a specific cultural or geographic community TYA is working towards inclusion of a disempowered community. Sensitivity and respect for this community is essential to entering this field or working with TYA artists.

2) That said, the best work is generally considered compelling to adult audiences. Great efforts are made not to “talk down” to the intended audience. I have often observed that people new to the field wrongly assume that they will be asked to compromise, edit or sensor themselves artistically. The truth is, if you are respectful of the complexity of experience and circumstances of young audiences, most professional adult artists are inspired to reach deeper and work harder to find truth and beauty that resonates and challenges both the adults and the young people in the audience.

3) Because the audience typically has fewer preconceived ideas about what a theatre experience should be, the invitation to experiment with styles, rules and content is almost always welcomed. Even if the adults get nervous (we will get to that soon) young people delight in theatrical worlds that are radically different from their own. As long as you welcome young people into the work and give them the basic tools to process what they are experiencing they will be a most curious audience. They also tend to be much more honest when something is not compelling, which is infinitely more useful to an artist than polite smiles and golf claps.

4) The art young people experience will become the building blocks for the work they will create. I tend to believe that these young people will create work that is richer, better and beyond my dreams, so I try to think of my work as a bridge to advance and inspire what might be the art of the future.

5) The best TYA work is built on imagination, wonder and curiosity and the best TYA artists I have met all have a glimmer in their eye and a touch of troublemaker in their soul.

Five reasons why I believe there is great potential in NET and TYA theatres working together

1) Many TYA companies have a history of devised work either within the ensemble or within their educational work but we are not always up on the possibilities and cutting edge conversations about what devised work can be.
2) Young audiences understand ensemble and appreciate cooperation and every generational expert predicts that their tendency is towards collaboration and connectivity. Ensembles speak to that impulse.

3) Most TYA folks believe in community, social justice and the impact their work will have into the future so like many (but not all) ensembles we are motivated by principles. When you multiply the effects of impact over time there is no question that younger audiences are simply a great investment.

4) We contain multitudes! The TYA audience has the potential of delivering LARGE audiences either through established touring networks or school performances (which are large audiences booked en mass).

5) Both communities have won some hard earned respect in the last decade and the larger theatrical field seems to be opening to the possibilities for ensemble based art and art made for young people. Together, I think the work can be extraordinary.

**Five issues one must overcome when producing TYA work**

1) Multiple layers of purchasing. Unfortunately, young people rarely make the decision about what art they will attend. They depend on parents, teachers and many gatekeepers who have their own agendas about what this experience should be. The positive aspect of this is that parents and teachers can become extraordinary advocates on behalf of the art.

2) Title Counts. This is unfortunately the case with so much art but in the TYA world this often means having a connection to literature. The good news is that there are almost always ways to market work so that it is appealing to those who may be interested in providing an educational or cultural experience as well as an artistic one. Figuring out what your angle is and communicating the value clearly is essential for standing out in this field.

3) Economics of Scale. Ticket price for a family or school often becomes a deal breaker. The good news is that since the plays are generally shorter (especially in a school day) it is possible to reach greater numbers.

4) Multiple audience groupings. If you create work for preschool audiences it is most likely not going to be appropriate for fifth graders. Especially with school based work becoming very specific about the ages you want to reach and why is important. Most non-TYA artists will say that their work appeals to High School students thinking that they are most similar to adults, but if one of the major reasons to expand your audience is to expand your work I always encourage groups to explore what work for younger audiences could look like.

5) Trust takes time. Relationships with schools are built slowly. Trust within a community (especially when you are building programming for children) is earned. This is another major reason I think partnerships between ensembles and existing TYA organizations and presenters may be the most reasonable response to this work.

**Five things you are going to love about doing TYA work with an ensemble**

1) The sense of play and creation that is necessary for an ensemble to do good work over time is palpable to an audience that loves to play and create themselves. This work will be recognized and treasured.
2) Your designers will have the opportunity to embrace imagination and innovation and push sensory worlds in remarkable ways (we are long past pig tails safety pined on overall butts).

3) Egos are in check. For the most part I have found that those who choose to create work for young audiences are not gaming for glamour or riches (or they do not last long in the field). There is great satisfaction in the work itself and in the belief in the impact art can make.

4) Thanks to the pioneering work of many, there are almost no topics off limits to this work. While this changes community by community and according to the needs of students, great work is being created that is political, abstract, artful, sensual and extremely cutting edge.

5) If you have never heard 400 students truly belly laugh you have not lived.

**Five Service Organizations You Should Know About**

1) ASSITEJ: International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People
   www.assitej-international.org

2) TYA/USA: is the United States Center for (ASSITEJ) Theatre for Young Audiences:
   www.tyausa.org

3) AATE: American Alliance for Theatre & Education
   www.aate.com

4) Your local or State organization. These are invaluable as most are a mix of educational and professional organizations and TYA work can draw resources and audiences from both communities.

5) IPAY: International Performing Arts for Youth
   www.ipayweb.org

**Five International TYA Ensembles to spark your curiosity for more work**

1) Polyglot: An Australian ensemble that creates site-specific large scale work.
   www.polyglot.org.au

2) Dynamo: A French Canadian acrobatic and clowning company
   www.dynamotheatre.qc.ca/en

3) Terrapin Puppet Theatre: A Tasmanian contemporary puppetry company
   www.terrapin.org.au

4) Oily Cart: A UK based company that creates multi-sensory theatre for young people with disabilities.
   www.oilycart.org.uk

5) Platform Shift: A really interesting collective of international companies working on the intersection of technology and TYA work.
   www.platformshift.eu
Five places to find out more about American work

1) New Victory Theatre always has interesting work from all over the world.
www.newvictory.org

2) American Theatre Magazine article
A List of Some American TYA Theatres doing interesting work
www.americantheatre.org/2016/03/22/20-theatres-you-should-take-your-kids-to

3) New Visions/New Voices
A bi-annual play development festival at the Kennedy Center that has partnered with ensembles in the past.
www.education.kennedy-center.org//education/nvnev.html

4) One Theatre World
The gathering of TYA/USA Members
www.tyausa.org

5) Write me. I love connecting folk and helping to advance the field in any way I can.
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