



ASSITEJ NEW ZEALAND

PERFORMING ARTS AND
YOUNG PEOPLE AOTEAROA

PAYPA Resource #1

What is 'Quality'?

Excellence in Performing Arts for/by/with Children and Young People

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With input from members of
Aotearoa's Performing Arts & Young People sector

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Introduction

This resource is for artists and practitioners engaged in performing arts work for/by/with children and young people in Aotearoa.

What is Quality? Excellence in Performing Arts for/by/with Children and Young People is the first in a series of digital resources published by PAYPA for use in our sector. The resources are intended to be living documents which help guide practitioners to hold young people at the centre of creating excellence in performing arts for/by/with young people, while sustaining their own practice and wellbeing.

This first resource –

1. Provides background information on the field of performing arts and young people in Aotearoa
2. Explores the relevance and benefits of performing arts for/by/with children and young people
3. Examines definitions of ‘quality’ in performing arts for/by/with children and young people

Our intention, over time, is to update this resource and add new resources, drawing on the collective experience of Aotearoa’s Performing Arts & Young People sector.

I have spent my career either performing in, directing, devising or teaching theatre for/by/with young people. In 2021 I completed a practice-as-research PhD¹ which focussed on devised theatre with and for young people. With a huge group of young collaborators, I co-created two plays for children. My thesis interrogated the devising process, which included investigating ways to involve the proposed audience into the creation process. I also examined TYA as a genre

¹ [Child’s Play: Devising Intergenerational Collaborative Theatre With and For Young People in Aotearoa New Zealand, by Kerryn Lisa Palmer - Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington 2021](#)

and interviewed many TYA practitioners throughout Aotearoa and internationally. I researched the whakapapa of Children's Theatre in Aotearoa and made recommendations for the industry. The research reinforced my love and admiration for young people, for theatre and for dedicated theatre practitioners who, against many odds, continue to create beautiful and meaningful work for young people. It also encouraged me to strengthen my advocacy and creative work in the sector, in the pursuit of New Zealand's recognition as a world leader of quality and sustainable theatre for/by/with young people.

This resource draws on some of that research and also reflects some of my own (subjective) opinions. It is intended to be used to encourage debate, analysis and thought around the genre.

Thank you to the PAYPA Board and all members of the PA&YP² sector who generously contributed perspectives and tips for this resource, and to the incomparable Jenny Wake who gave me my first professional job in TYA and continues to be a wonderful lifelong mentor and friend.

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Wonderkind
- *Wonderlight Theatre Aotearoa*
Image: Roc Photography



² Performing Arts & Young People

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Performing Arts & Young People in Aotearoa

As this is the first in PAYPA's series of resources for TYA³ practitioners, we will start with some background information relevant to the PA&YP⁴ sector in Aotearoa.

What is PAYPA?

[PAYPA](#) – Performing Arts & Young People Aotearoa – is the national support entity for artists and organisations engaged in performing arts for, by and with children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are a not-for-profit organisation and operate as a leadership organisation and network for practitioners working for and with tamariki and rangatahi⁵ aged 0-25 years.



The purpose of PAYPA is to promote, champion, advocate for and advance the enrichment of tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa through theatre and other performing arts. PAYPA advocates for the right of all children and young people to access and participate in artistic experiences. We are committed to ensuring that performing

³ Theatre for Young Audiences

⁴ Performing Arts & Young People

⁵ Children and young people

artists and organisations working for or with young people are well-supported, highly valued and resilient, so that all tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa have access to high-quality performing arts experiences.

There are five **key values** that underpin our work:

- **Hauora**
We value work that supports physical, mental, spiritual and community wellbeing. We encourage work which supports the health of all participants, our audiences and the wider sector.
- **Manaakitanga**
We foster joyful spaces for theatre makers and audiences that embrace care, respect, generosity and creativity.
- **Ōritetanga**
We champion the right of all young people in Aotearoa to access performing arts experiences, regardless of nationality, cultural identity, ability, gender, sexual orientation, location, ethnicity, religion or socio-economic factors.
- **Whakahōnore**
We commit to increasing our understanding and inclusion of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Treaty of Waitangi principles and te ao Māori in all that we do.
- **Whakawhanaungatanga**
We aim to unite practitioners, nationally and internationally, to support and inspire each other to make work of the highest quality for/with/by children and young people.

PAYPA's work is guided by our **overarching vision**:

High-quality and accessible performing arts experiences for/by/with tamariki and rangatahi are created by/with engaged and valued performing artists.

Regular PAYPA activities include:

- Sharing of news and opportunities through the PAYPA newsletter ([subscribe here](#)), [Facebook page](#), [Facebook group](#) and [website](#)
- Regular updates to pages on the PAYPA website promoting members' work, including an Events Calendar and pages promoting touring productions, workshops, festivals, and training, networking and employment opportunities
- Updates (whenever requested) to the Artists and Organisations page on the PAYPA website, enabling anyone (schools, parents, PA&YP practitioners, venue or festival programmers, etc) to connect with New Zealand PA&YP artists and organisations
- Sharing of the PA&YP sector's collective knowledge and expertise through resources such as this one
- Professional development opportunities, including online and in-person workshops
- Online practitioner gatherings to connect with each other and discuss PA&YP sector issues
- Annual awards celebrating excellence in the PA&YP sector, including Emerging Artist, Most Original Production and the Peter Wilson Supreme Award for Excellence in TYA
- An annual PAYPA Hui celebrating PA&YP in Aotearoa and typically featuring a panel discussion, networking opportunities and presentation of the annual PAYPA awards

PAYPA is New Zealand's National Centre for [ASSITEJ](#) – the International Association of Theatre & Performing Arts for Children & Young People.

Find out more about PAYPA on the [PAYPA website](#).

What is ASSITEJ?

[ASSITEJ](#) is the International Association of Theatre & Performing Arts for Children & Young People. ASSITEJ strives to unite theatres, organisations and individuals throughout the world dedicated to performing arts for children and young people.



International Association of
Theatre & Performing Arts for
Children & Young People

ASSITEJ promotes international exchange of knowledge and practice in theatre and other performing arts in order to increase creative co-operation and to deepen mutual understanding between all persons involved in the performing arts for young audiences.

ASSITEJ comprises a network of autonomous National Centres. PAYPA, the National Centre for ASSITEJ in Aotearoa, is known internationally as ASSITEJ New Zealand. Every three years, National Centres come together for a General Assembly to set the working plan for the next three years, vote for a new ASSITEJ International Executive Committee and choose hosts for the next World Congress and future Artistic Gatherings.

Regular ASSITEJ activities include:

- A monthly newsletter sharing international news and opportunities, such as calls for performances for upcoming international TYA⁶ festivals – you can [subscribe to receive the ASSITEJ newsletter](#) directly
- International online coffee sessions on given topics, in which you can discuss issues and share knowledge and perspectives with TYA colleagues around the world
- Next Generation programmes, hosted by National Centres,

⁶ Theatre for Young Audiences

offering intensive professional development and international networking opportunities for young TYA artists up to age 35

- The ASSITEJ World Congress and Festival, held every three years and hosted by a National Centre, attracting over 1000 international TYA practitioners and festival directors, and featuring workshops, seminars, forums, playwrights' slams, networking opportunities, a Next Generation programme, high-quality TYA productions from around the world and the ASSITEJ General Assembly
- An annual ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering, held in each of the two years between World Congresses and featuring workshops, forums, TYA productions and a Next Generation programme

In 2019, as a response to the COVID crisis, ASSITEJ International developed a [manifesto](#) to be used as a tool and, through a coordinated international campaign, as a lever for recognition and support for arts addressed to children and young people, and those who produce it. The introduction to the ASSITEJ Manifesto states:

ASSITEJ, the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, believes that much more needs to be done to meet all countries' obligations with respect to Articles 13 and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. ...

ASSITEJ recommends involving children and young people through consultation and collaboration and ensuring inclusion of their opinions and



perspectives, at every possible level. (Article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

The manifesto makes several recommendations and urges citizens, governments, political parties, ministries, local authorities, arts councils, arts organisations, schools, learning institutions and the media to take action to ensure that Articles 13 & 31 of the UN [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) are upheld:

Article 13: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Article 31: Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. Governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The ASSITEJ Manifesto is [available online](#) for download and use by ASSITEJ National Centres (such as PAYPA) and by TYA artists and practitioners throughout the world.

Find out more about ASSITEJ on the [ASSITEJ International website](#).

Terminology within the PA&YP field

Throughout this document (and on [PAYPA's website](#)) there are different terms used to describe performing arts made for/by/with young people. Following are explanations of some of them:

PA&YP (Performing Arts and Young People)

PAYPA uses the term 'Performing Arts and Young People' (PA&YP) to include all performing arts that intersect with young people, including (but not limited to) theatre, circus, puppetry, dance, kapa haka and music.

TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences)

'TYA' is a contemporary term encompassing a wide range of performing arts for audiences aged from 0 to 25. A related term, now less commonly used, is 'TYP' (Theatre for Young People).

Young People / Young Audiences

Throughout this resource, the terms 'young people' and 'young audiences' encompass infants, children and young people aged 0-25.

Theatre

ASSITEJ defines 'theatre' in the context of their organisation to mean:

The performing arts for young audiences, encompassing dance, puppetry and visual mediums, live art as well as text-based theatre.⁷

Creative New Zealand (CNZ) defines 'theatre' as including:

Both classical and contemporary theatre and all genres such as comedy, drama, physical theatre, devised theatre, street theatre, musical theatre, circus, puppetry, mask and theatre for children. It includes customary and contemporary practices of all the peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand, including Māori and Pasifika peoples and the diverse cultures of people living in Aotearoa/New Zealand today.⁸

More specific terms can be used to identify **who** is making the theatrical event, **how**, and in **what** context.

⁷ [ASSITEJ website](#)

⁸ [CNZ Theatre Funding Guidelines](#)

Children's Theatre

'Children's Theatre' is often used as an umbrella term used to cover a range of activities that bring together children and theatre-making in some way. A related term is 'YPT' (Young People's Theatre).

Youth Theatre

This term generally refers to theatre groups, productions and workshops in which teens and young adults are active participants, as performers, directors, co-creators and/or drivers of the creative process.

Performing Arts by/with/for Young People

New Zealand's key arts funding body Creative New Zealand (CNZ) differentiates between arts activities by, with or for young people. The definitions they provide for these different activities⁹ are:

Arts activities by young people:

This means arts activities that are driven, owned, created, programmed, presented or delivered by young people. It may involve the young people being mentored or taught by experienced artists. If there is a presentation outcome, it is likely to be specifically aimed at young audiences, their whānau¹⁰ and communities.

Arts activities with young people:

This means activities where young people are actively involved or learn from the work of more experienced artists or organisations. It is about offering young people access to different artforms and arts organisations.

Arts activities for young people:

This means activities by professional artists where the audience for the work is young people, their whānau and communities.

⁹ [CNZ Young New Zealanders | Funding Guidelines](#)

¹⁰ Families

TIE (Theatre in Education)

'TIE' is defined by academics JH Davis and T Behm as "a complex program involving some formal performance by professional actor-teachers, some classroom creative drama work, and an opportunity for all the participants to interact with the professional performers in role."¹¹ In New Zealand, TIE typically involves professional actors touring educational theatre productions to schools. Performances are often followed by workshops run by the visiting actors and accompanied by an educational resource for teachers. However, 'TIE' is now regarded as a somewhat outdated term and is now often referred to as 'Applied Theatre'.

Applied Theatre

New Zealand company Applied Theatre Co. Ltd describes 'applied theatre' as "the use of theatrical forms in non-traditional theatre spaces to explore issues of interest and concern to communities."¹²



*Story Studio Live – Capital E
National Theatre for Children
Image: Capital E*

¹¹ Davis, Jed & Tom Behm. "Terminology of Drama/Theatre with and for Children: A Redefinition." *Children's Theatre Review*, vol. XXV11, no. 1, 1978.

¹² [Applied Theatre Co. Ltd website](#)

Why Performing Arts for/by/with Young People?

A useful starting point for investigating quality in PA&YP is to look at its purpose and value – why we do it.

The Relevance and Benefits of Theatre by/with/for Young People

There is considerable literature which examines the value of drama and theatre specifically by/with/for children. Australian Drama in Education academic Meg Upton, for example, maintains:

Theatre allows us to imagine a different reality, and in so doing to know that it can be one of our own making – that we can both be its creator and a character within it. We have in ourselves, the power to make choices about who we want to be, to shape the kind of world we want to live in.¹³

The power of theatre to affect the way the world is shaped is also discussed by The Guardian's theatre reviewer, and fierce advocate for children's theatre, Lyn Gardner:

At a time when the pressures on young people are perhaps greater than they have been at any time since the second world war, and the challenges faced by massive cultural and technological shifts, climate change, and economic collapse are immense, what we need is a rising generation who can use their

¹³ Upton, Meg. "Supporting Young Theatre Audiences to Engage with Challenging Subject Matter - a Partnership Approach." *Mask*. Spring/Summer 2012

*heads to solve those problems but also their imaginations... Theatre, particularly theatre for children, fires the imagination, it gives our children the skills and the creativity necessary to face the world, to understand it and perhaps to change it too. We should value children's theatre and take it seriously and that means treating it with the respect that we would any work of art including reviewing and critiquing it.*¹⁴

Wellington performing arts teacher, Jo Hodgson, sums it up in one of her 2017 theatre reviews:

*At a time when arts education is being severely diluted in favour of pushing the core subjects and children are being lured to the screen more and more, we need to take them to the theatre. We need opportunities for children to engage in stories and imagination, to not just be a passive observer, but to be moved, to relate, to empathise and to experience the beauty of being taken on a journey through the ultimate pop-up book which is live theatre.*¹⁵

Recognition of the benefits of exposing children to drama and theatre can be distilled into four main areas:

- **The educative benefit** is the notion that engaging children in drama and theatre will increase their knowledge and improve their education: "When pupils are thinking and behaving creatively in the classroom, you are likely to see them: questioning and challenging, making connections and seeing relationships, envisaging what might be, exploring ideas, keeping options open, reflecting critically on actions and outcomes."¹⁶
- **The emotional benefit** is the belief that through drama and theatre, people can examine their emotions, feelings, fears and desires, identities, and enhance their emotional intelligence:

¹⁴ [Gardner, Lynn. "Why Children's Theatre Matters." The Guardian, 23 Oct. 2013](#)

¹⁵ [Hodgson, Jo. "Spellbinding Wonder and Heart." Theatreview, 13 Oct. 2017](#)

¹⁶ Woolland, Brian. "What Did You Make of That? More Than Just a Figure of Speech." Drama and Theatre with Children International Perspectives edited by, Charru Sharma. Routledge, 2016, pp. 23-30

“Drama classrooms can be a safe place to explore our burgeoning identity. We can try out our beliefs without long-lasting, real-life consequence.”¹⁷

- **The cultural benefit** is the conviction that the stimulation and development of children's cultural knowledge and experience of the arts is a valuable part of life. The fact that The United Nations sees participation in the arts as a “basic human right” highlights the perceived importance of cultural life in the development of a child.¹⁸
- **Building a future audience** is the concept of presenting theatre by, with and for young people for future audience development. This, however, is a contentious reason for making and presenting children’s theatre. For example:
 - New Zealand creative producer Stephen Blackburn’s 2016 article “Respect the Work”¹⁹ suggests that, in recent years, major theatre companies have declared an interest in young audiences as part of a need for their organisation to engage in audience development, but he believes that this reliance on an ‘audience in the making’ disrespects the audience.
 - In response to the question “Why should we have children’s theatre?”, seminal TYA academic Moses Goldberg suggests that exposure to good theatre will make a future adult more likely to be a theatre goer but concedes that there is no evidence to support this.²⁰
 - Academics Tom Maguire and Karian Schuitema assert that providing good theatre experiences may encourage some children to grow up enjoying theatre, but that investment in

¹⁷ Stevens, Aundraea. “Putting the EI into drama: it’s not as tricky as you might think.” *Drama and Theatre with Children: International Perspectives*, edited by, Charu Sharma. Routledge, 2016, pp. 13-22

¹⁸ United Nations Charter: Human Rights Officer of The High Commissioner. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

¹⁹ Blackburn, Stephen. “Respect the Work” *Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre*. Playmarket. 2016

²⁰ Goldberg, Moses. *Children’s Theatre: A Philosophy and a Method*. Pearson Education Canada, 1974.

the future should not be the main incentive: “We want to give young audiences exciting theatre NOW, for its own sake, rather than do it to create tomorrow’s adult audience.”²¹

- Matthew Reason, a leading UK academic specialising in children’s theatre, suggests that too much focus on audience development undervalues the importance of children as an audience in their own right: “To perceive young people’s engagement with theatre as primarily about audience development is to value the adult audience they might become, rather than the audience they are now.”²² Thus, the building of a future audience should not be the predominant reason that theatre companies programme TYA work; instead, they should be considering work that is suitable, engaging and satisfying at that particular moment in their audiences’ lives: “Children are not the audience of the future. Rather they are citizens of the here-and-now, with important cultural entitlements.”²³ Presenting TYA solely for the purpose of creating a future audience is, arguably, a way of marginalising the views of children and the TYA genre.

Regardless of whether the benefits are educational, emotional, cultural or future-focussed, teachers, parents, academics and practitioners all seem to agree that the arts are of great importance and benefit to young people. CNZ’s own research concluded:

The majority of New Zealanders (60%) agree that the arts should receive public funding. When you fund the arts, you also fund education, health and wellbeing, the strengthening of community.

²¹ Maguire, Tom, and Karian Schuitema. *Theatre for Young Audiences: A Critical Handbook*. Institute of Education Press, 2012.

²² Reason, Matthew. *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children’s Experiences of Theatre*. Trentham Books, 2010.

²³ Drury qtd. in Reason, *The Young Audience*.

73% of our young people feel good about life in general when taking part in arts activities. An [Australian study](#) suggests that just two or more hours of arts engagement per week has the potential to enhance wellbeing.²⁴

So how well are our schools in Aotearoa doing in providing arts experiences for our young people?

In Professor Peter O'Connor's 2021 lecture [Te Rito Toi: The Twice Born Seed](#), he provocatively states: "We know that Aotearoa schools are killing creativity. The evidence is overwhelming." He highlights recent research by the Centre for the Arts and Social Transformation at the University of Auckland, which details how the narrow focusing on literacy and numeracy in primary schools, the almost complete lack of arts in Initial Teacher Education, and a poverty of resourcing in the arts in schools are primary suspects of the silent but incredibly effective destruction of creativity in schools.

The NCEA system of qualifications, introduced into New Zealand schools between 2002 and 2004, gave some hope to drama teachers that, at last, arts subjects would have the same importance as subjects such as Maths, Science and English. But has it really? In 2021, I received a letter from my children's high school about future changes to NCEA, and one paragraph stood out:

We need to be more deliberate in developing the competencies we know help students thrive as they move into the wider world – things like collaboration, creativity, resilience, critical thinking and courage.

It is no real surprise that the competencies listed are all skills gained from participation in the arts. It's what we as arts practitioners know deeply and have been fighting for, for years.

Professor O'Connor debates the loss of arts in schools, over the

²⁴ Wenley, James. [The fuss over Shakespeare is a distraction from the real scandal of arts funding. Stuff, 18 Oct 2022](#)

past ten years in particular, in his article [“Teachers Hope to End ‘Near Death’ of Arts in Schools”](#):

Visual arts, music, dance and drama, the life blood of a creative education have been systematically dismantled from schools... National standards in literacy and numeracy narrowed the curriculum in primary schools and the biggest casualty was the arts. Although the standards have gone in name, their ghost still hangs over classrooms restraining both what and how things are taught and measured. The arts either totally disappeared, or were relegated to optional “what do we do on a Friday afternoon”.

O’Connor argues that overseas evidence has proved that students in arts-rich schools do better than students at schools that focus on numeracy and literacy, and suggests that “the cost for the near-death of the arts in school is high... When schools deny children the arts, they deny them their imagination.”²⁵

If young people are better off having access to the arts, and if the competencies that the arts provide are seen as lacking in schools, why then are the arts – and in particular arts for/by/with young people – not better valued and better funded? And if schools are “killing creativity”, then surely we, as artists making work for/by/with young people, have a greater responsibility than ever to restore it.

The Challenges

The 2018 Census shows that, in June that year, 944,600 of the 4,885,300 people in New Zealand belonged to the 0-14 age group, representing nearly 20% of the total population.²⁶ However, of the 27

²⁵ [O’Connor, Peter. “Teachers Hope to End ‘near Death’ of Arts in School.” News Room, January 21 2020](#)

²⁶ [National population estimates: At 30 June 2018 | Stats NZ](#)

theatre and dance organisations receiving annual funding from 2023 to 2025 through Creative New Zealand’s Tōtara and Kahikatea programmes, only one is child-focussed.²⁷

There are challenges involved in making all theatre and performing arts work in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mostly, these challenges revolve around funding, aesthetic considerations, audience retention, relevance and accessibility. Under-funding and under-valuing of arts in New Zealand society are huge ongoing challenges for the entire arts sector. However, existing literature suggests there are additional challenges specific to performing arts by/with/for young people.

Three that could be considered most pressing in terms of PA&YP are:

- 1) The conviction that all performing arts work for/by/with young people needs to be educative
- 2) Adults assessing what is best for children
- 3) Undermining excellence: “It’s just for children.”

1) The conviction that all performing arts work for/by/with young people needs to be educative:

Leading TYA scholar [Matthew Reason](#), in his book *The Young Audience*²⁸, questions the oft held belief that TYA needs to be educative. He contrasts it with theatre for adults, which is rarely solely perceived as having to be educational. He questions why theatre by and with young people is often situated within the educational realm and suggests that, because much TYA activity involves making theatre *with* children, or theatre made *by* children themselves, it is thought of as inherently having educational benefits and the focus of the work is often didactic. In contrast, he argues that theatre *for* children should sit alongside adult theatre as a cultural experience.

²⁷ [Investment Programmes Toi Totara Haemata and Toi Uru Kahikatea | Creative New Zealand](#)

²⁸ *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children’s Experiences of Theatre*, by Matthew Reason, Trenthem Books 2010

However, unlike adult theatre, it is often *expected* to have some sort of educational value.

Theatre companies in New Zealand are consistently underfunded and perpetually having to base artistic and programming decisions on the need to maximise the size of their paying audiences. Schools and parents, on the other hand, often make funding decisions based on educative or cultural value. This leads to a tension between spending money on a unique cultural experience, or on an experience that is educational as well.

The risk of constantly aligning theatre with education is that theatre becomes a form which is *always* associated with education and school, and young people lose opportunities to experience art for art's sake. Matthew Reason states in *The Young Audience* that "discussion about adult theatre is almost always discussion about aesthetics, art and theatre. Discussion about theatre for children is rarely so straightforward and is as often about education as about art."

2) Adults assessing what is best for children:

In many academic discussions about the creation of TYA works, adults (scholars and practitioners) are seen to be constantly assessing what they believe children want to see and, in turn, determining what is 'good' TYA, based on these presumptions. How often do we consult with young people about what they want to see and experience?

Matthew Reason suggests that if we do not pay attention to the child in the audience and what they are experiencing, then TYA becomes theatre for children that is defined and produced solely by adults.²⁹ The adult assumes that they know what the child wants to see and, therefore, what is best for the child. Reason urges that children need to have agency and subjectivity over their own

²⁹ "The Possibility of Theatre for Children". *Theatre for Young Audiences: A Critical Handbook*, by Matthew Reason, edited by Tom, Maguire and Karian Schuitema, Institute of Education Press, 2012

experiences, which will, in turn, make culture for children more ideologically possible. He maintains that, in our culture, theatre for children is a product made for children, but is made and consumed in a way that is not democratic or equal: "Children are a benevolently coerced audience, brought to the theatre by schools, parents or other guardians. They are taken to the theatre perhaps in the same way that children are sent to school or taken to the dentist – because it is good for them."

PAYPA Resource #2 will explore how practitioners can work in ways that genuinely put young people at the centre of the work being created for, by and with them.

3) Undermining excellence: 'It's just for children.'

During my research I surveyed the majority of New Zealand theatre companies making work for/by/with young people and discovered that many feel undervalued. They share a sense that, because their work is specifically aimed at young people, it is overlooked for awards and reviews, and not taken seriously by colleagues. They often hear comments such as:

"It's just for kids, we don't have to rehearse much."

"I'm dropping out of this children's show to perform in something that is better for my career."

"You don't need as much funding for this as for an adult show."

Calico Theatre director Jenny Wake recalls a school attempting to book a Calico show with the proviso that they could opt to pay less than full price after the performance if they thought it wasn't very good. If they'd done the maths, they might have realised that the fee covered less than the actors' wages, transport and accommodation for the day of the performance at their school, the tour being subsidised by a CNZ grant.

Sadly, notions persist that theatre for children doesn't/shouldn't

cost very much to produce and tour, and that performing arts practitioners don't need to be paid much (if at all) because they're not really working (they're doing it for the love of it) – as if the costs of venue hire, tech, design, rehearsal, marketing and touring are magically reduced for TYA companies, and loving your work justifies less than minimum pay rates. For TYA producers in Aotearoa, there is a perpetual tension between, on the one hand, budgeting for fair remuneration and high production standards and, on the other hand, pricing for accessibility and audience perceptions of what is a fair ticket price for children and families. Expectations that TYA should be made on shoestring budgets and ticket prices should be minimal undermine companies in their efforts to deliver high-quality theatre experiences for young audiences.

Also persistent is the idea that TYA is somehow less important than theatre for adults. Not only does this view disrespect young people as an audience, it also relegates TYA professionals to a lower status than their mainstream counterparts and deprioritises theatre for young audiences in funding, resourcing and programming decisions. Among the flow-on effects are too-short development and rehearsal periods for TYA productions, TYA shows performed on mismatched main-bill sets, emerging artists overlooking TYA as a rewarding career specialisation, and undervaluing of the specialist expertise of experienced TYA practitioners.

Despite these challenges, TYA artists in Aotearoa remain passionate about their work and continue to strive for excellence. We owe it to our tamariki and rangatahi to ensure that the theatre we make for and with them is of the highest possible quality.

The Joy

Given the challenges in creating and producing performing arts work for/by/with young people, why do we do what we do?

I asked some PAYPA members why they make work for, by and with young people:

- **Hannah Smith, Trick of the Light Theatre**

I make TYP for young people because I am interested in telling universal stories and believe in the importance of making art that is engaging to that age bracket (and that they can share with adults) both in and of itself, and because theatre-going kids turn into theatre going adults. I am motivated to make work that is both the kind I wanted to see when I was that age, and the kind of work I want to see now.

- **Dawn Sanders, SGCNZ**

The realisation from a young age myself of the fragility of life, providing enjoyment, thought-provoking and self-challenging experiences, and the importance of encouraging TYA to maximise their potential. Seeing the results are richest rewards in themselves.

- **Mel Luckman, Cubbin Theatre Company**

We make work for very young children (0-5) because they are whole, complete people as they are, and they deserve age-appropriate art as much as adults. These are the most formative years of a person's life, and artistic experiences create positive neural pathways in our brains and show us different ways we can make sense of the world around us. Creativity is so beneficial for children and their caregivers and people in Aotearoa are crying out for it.

- **Jo Randerson, Barbarian Productions**

We make theatre with young people because cross-generational connections are crucial for the deep change we need. We live in complex times – theatre can handle complexity. Theatre is a human language and can speak where traditional means cannot, it touches our spirits and can change our lives.

- **Sacha Copland, Java Dance Theatre**

We make work for young people because they respond to dance and music intuitively. We are speaking the same language. I love seeing the relief on the faces of young people when we mirror their imaginative, physical, expressive relationship with the world.

- **Jenny Wake, Calico Young People's Theatre**

Children influence me in so many ways. I make theatre for young people because I must - something drives me to do it! Love of theatre, love of children and childhood... The idea for my next production has frequently come when sitting in the audience experiencing my current production surrounded by children. Their laughter, delight and emotional responses inspire me.

- **Mixit**

The capacity for the arts to make a significant and meaningful difference in a young person's life.

- **Sam Scott, Massive Theatre Company**

I want to build theatre makers who I hope are open and curious and rigorous. Who strive for excellence. I want them to experience this as young people and not wait until they are adults, so that it affects them now. But why did I choose to work with young people? I think initially and as I explored more performance mediums, I could see that some of the adult acting community were very closed off to certain ways of working, and I wanted to work with people who were open to exploring and seeing what theatre could be.

The Island 2016

- *Massive Theatre Company*

Image: Andi Crown



- **Kenny King, Little Dog Barking**

Interesting question with a myriad of answers. I guess, for me, it's important that young people get a chance to see live theatre. To see there are other options than the device in their hands. That they get to experience the immediacy of emotion that comes with live performance. Little Dog Barking often performs to children who may never get to experience theatre due to financial constraints or cultural boundaries. Theatre is often seen as elitist. I want to break those stereotypes. I believe everyone deserves the opportunity to witness live performance at least once in their lives.

- **Two Productions**

As a company we want Art to be a normal part of everyday life for everyone. This needs to start with young people. We also find that young people are brave, woke and creative – they are interested in tackling interesting and important topics.

- **David Rumney, Duffy Theatre**

I love working with young, keen actors. I cherish seeing the show we have made bring absolute joy to the faces of kids all over New Zealand that get to experience live theatre, some of them just once a year when the Duffy Show comes to town. I genuinely believe our show makes a difference and encourages kids to pick up a book even just for a fleeting moment, that is the beginning of a pretty important relationship between human and literacy.

- **Bridget and Roger Sanders, Birdlife Productions**

We make TYP because we really truly believe in the power of theatre to transform and improve children's lives. We love the immediacy of young people to experience without judgement and allow themselves to dwell in wonderment. Also - we can have so much fun!

- **Ben Ashby, Long Cloud Youth Theatre**

I am the Artistic Director of Long Cloud Youth Theatre. A training programme for 16-25 year old artists who are figuring out if they want to make a career in the arts. I work with groups of 10-20 rangatahi at a time and I love it. It's like surfing a tidal wave of hunger, emotion, power and creativity. We mostly make devised theatre with a key focus being how to have an idea and see it all the way through into a piece of art. I can start off with a very broad nudge of a provocation and the ideas come thick and fast in the room. It's so exciting to be in a room of young creative energy and incredibly rewarding to see the development of skills and execution of ideas from the company members as they grow throughout the training programme.

- **Tim Bray, QSM, Tim Bray Theatre**

I did a Bachelor of Science degree as it had been my childhood dream to follow my hero Jacques Cousteau into marine biology. But my first job after graduating was performing in schools with Mary Amoores Theatredays programme with the Auckland Youth Theatre. I had been a drama student at the AYT all through my teenage years. With Theatredays, I fell in love with performing to children. Since then, hearing the laughter, the unified 'wow' or the engrossed hush of children from theatrical moments we have created has brought me immense joy. I love taking children into other worlds through the power of imagination and each audience we have is a powerful reminder of my own delight in shows my late parents took me to when I was a child.

A Lion in the Meadow
- Tim Bray Theatre Company
Photo by David Rowland /
One-Image.com



- **Beth Kayes, Co Theatre Physical**

I LOVE performing for young people as they give you such immediate feedback and it is always fun, who can ask for more in a job?

- **Lynne Cardy, Capital E National Theatre for Children**

I make work with and for children and young people because I believe in them. I believe in the power of their imaginations, and I am inspired by the joy, openness, and empathy they bring as an audience and as collaborators. I connect strongly to my childhood experiences of encountering theatre - always exciting, sometimes scary, and often unforgettable. I love nothing more than sharing a great show with children as they are the most generous audience. Seeing it through their eyes, and the way they respond and embody the story as it unfolds unlocks my emotions, brings layers of meaning to the surface, and reminds me of the unlimited possibilities for people to understand each other better by sharing together.

- **Tānemahuta Gray, Taki Rua**

Taki Rua has a major focus on presenting Te Reo Māori works to our tamariki and tamaiti nohinohi, as it is a wonderful opportunity to share our language as a living daily experience for our children. The opportunity to utilise waiata and physical theatre forms, with bold characterisations allows our students who cannot speak te Reo Māori to support their comprehension of the shows narratives and themes. We know that providing children with these unique cultural theatre experiences in schools is the building of future theatre lovers and Taki Rua has been investing in our tamariki for 27 years through the school shows Te Reo Māori Season programme. We are very excited to be presenting a new production programme for pre-schoolers and kōhanga tamariki called Te Reo Tātarakihi. We are delighted to provide a fully te Reo Māori performance of our 2019 Te Reo Māori Season - *Te Kuia me te Pūngāwerewere*, (shortened to a

25 minute production), which will provide our 2–5 year olds with their own te reo Māori theatre work specifically for our tamariki and their parents enjoyment. This will be a great challenge to see if we can engage our tamati nohinohi concentration span throughout the performance, as our first foray into this age group.

It truly is an honour to serve the creative imaginations of our future audiences and theatre practitioners.

Kei a rātou ngā rangatira mō āpōpō.

For they are our leaders of tomorrow.

It's not only professional practitioners who delight in making theatre for young audiences, children and young people do too. Recently, I took my 5-year-old niece to see Disney's *Frozen JR*, performed by Musical Stars, a Wellington-based academy of young performers. Sceptical of Disney and, in particular, tropes that are often sexist and Eurocentric, I really didn't know what to expect beyond sharing some quality time with my *Frozen*-loving niece. I certainly didn't expect to have one of the best nights at the theatre I have had for a long time (and have the *Frozen* soundtrack stuck on loop in my head a week later). I have been thinking a lot about why it was such a joyous occasion. Talita Archibald and her team had not just managed to pull off a polished, high-quality production of a Disney classic, they had also wrangled 129 children (ranging from 5 to 16 years) over seven months, including five different core casts alternating on a regular basis. Aside from being a logistical nightmare, this was genius in the way that so many children got to experience being in a fully-fledged, all singing and dancing production.

Afterwards, a parent commented on how there was a real lack of ego amongst the young people. Experiencing different roles and watching other people do the same role as them in a collaborative and positive way seemed to take away a lot of the star-orientated, diva-style behaviours that sometimes occur in Musical Theatre. What I experienced was a group of young people having a genuinely

wonderful time, supporting each other, and relishing in the performance and in the sharing of that performance with their family and friends. It was truly magical and, although those Disney tropes still existed, they didn't take away from what those children were experiencing at that moment and, presumably, also during the long months of rehearsal.



Backstage at Disney's Frozen JR – Musical Stars

Image: Musical Stars

Excellence in Performing Arts for/by/with Young People

Working in numerous 'adult' professional theatre contexts, I have experienced a range of practitioner and audience attitudes which reinforce that 'quality' in theatre is wholly subjective. However, standards by which 'quality' can be assessed can be clarified through discussions between artists and funders, academic discourse around how audiences engage with theatre, and published reviews of specific productions. Theoretically, these standards relate to the production values, aesthetic expectations, the level of skill employed in each production, contribution of the work to knowledge, cultural relevance and audience impact as evidenced by standing ovations, awards and extended or return seasons.

The interpretation of 'quality' in theatre for young audiences is, likewise, also subjective, and yet in New Zealand TYA is not often exposed to the same rigorous assessment as adult theatre. I suggest that if TYA is not subject to the same degree of discourse, discussion and reviewing as adult theatre, then the quality of TYA becomes harder to recognise. In connection with this is the reality that it is adults who are leading the research and debate where quality is considered. Consequently, the perception of quality is viewed through an adult lens, not through the eyes of young people.

Quality Principles

Briar Munro, former Arts Practice Director Community and Youth at

CNZ, told me that one approach CNZ has historically used to define quality or excellence in New Zealand has been to get artists to define what quality means to them, and how they themselves might measure it. Recently, CNZ has begun to engage with quality metrics developed in the UK. By feeding into a platform called Culture Counts, they are investigating the measuring of quality of artistic work by using a standardised set of metrics that artists themselves shape.³⁰ The UK-based quality metrics were developed in 2014 with the aim to “raise the standard of work being produced by, with and for children and young people.”³¹ The Arts Council of England worked with several arts and cultural organisations doing work with children and young people, to develop a set of seven principles relating to quality. The overall aim of the subsequent report was to “draw on the evidence base and work with the sector to co-create a set of principles which describe quality and excellence in work for, by, and with children and young people.”³² These principles were

summarised in a set of clear statements with accompanying questions relating directly to TYA. The UK Arts Council is now working closely with the TYA sector to integrate these quality principles into TYA work.

The Wholehearted
– Massive Theatre Company

Image: Andi Crown

³⁰ [Culture Counts - We Value Culture.](#)

³¹ [Quality Principles | Arts Council England.](#)

³² Sharp, Caroline and Lee, Ben. Using Quality Principles in Work for, by, and with Children and Young People: Results of a Pilot Study (Draft Final Report). Slough: NFER, 2015.

The seven principles and associated questions that could be considered by practitioners making work for/by/with young people are:

QUALITY PRINCIPLE	Questions to consider/ask
1. Striving for excellence and innovation	Is there a real commitment to achieving excellence by, with and for children and young people?
2. Being authentic	Is it authentic; is it the real thing?
3. Being exciting, inspiring and engaging	Are children and young people excited, engaged and inspired?
4. Ensuring a positive and inclusive experience	Does it ensure a positive and inclusive experience?
5. Actively involving children and young people	Are children and young people actively involved?
6. Enabling personal progression	Do children and young people progress and know where to go next?
7. Developing belonging and ownership	Do children and young people feel they belong and it belongs to them?

Quality Principles Table³³

³³ [Sharp, Caroline and Lee, Ben. Using Quality Principles in Work for, by, and with Children and Young People: Results of a Pilot Study \(Draft Final Report\). Slough: NFER, 2015.](#)

Alongside these principles, and in the spirit of CNZ's ethos to get artists to define their own concept of quality and ways to measure it, I also suggest that quality productions for children and young people should have:

1. High production values and aesthetic standards
2. A professional team of highly skilled practitioners
3. A realistic budget and funding that can assure reasonable remuneration and high production values

Audience Engagement and Connection as Markers of Quality

In articulating the quality of arts in his UK report *Supporting Excellence in the Arts* (2008), UK arts administrator, Sir Brian McMaster, writes:

*Excellent culture takes and combines complex meanings, gives us new insights and new understandings of the world around us and is relevant to every single one of us [...] The best definition of excellence I have heard is that excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual. An excellent cultural experience goes to the root of living.*³⁴

UK academic Matthew Reason believes quality is directly related to the nature of the audience's engagement:

*Quality in a cultural experience is its enduring resonance as it engages us intellectually, imaginatively or emotionally. A marker of quality in a work is its ability to make us look longer.*³⁵

In 2016, Playmarket commissioned a publication on TYA in New Zealand. Stephen Blackburn, former Creative Producer of Capital E

³⁴ [McMaster, Brian. "Supporting Excellence in the Arts from Measurement to Judgement". Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Jan. 2008](#)

³⁵ Reason, Matthew. *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre*. Trentham Books, 2010.

National Theatre for Children, contributed an article titled 'Respect the Work' in which he decries what he sees as a lack of commitment to quality in much of the TYA on offer in New Zealand:

*We add insult to injury by inflicting the audience with derivative fairy tales or didactic educational message work. At best it may offer a candy-floss like experience, a momentary sugar rush, and then nothing.*³⁶

In contrast, he cites Trick of the Light's *The Bookbinder* as an example of "engaging works that live in the memories of the audience long after the performance has concluded."

Matthew Reason maintains that a piece of TYA should not be viewed as a self-contained entity, separated from the rest of a child's life:

One criterion of quality in theatre for children, as for adult theatre, is the ability to provide pleasure in the moment of the experience and pleasure in an enduring, extended engagement. This interest in the extended encounter is a feature of philosophical conceptualisations of what it means to experience art. These place emphasis on not only the immediate sensory engagement but also what the individual does reflectively with and through that engagement... With theatre, therefore, what is important is not just what happens on the stage but also what

The Bookbinder
- Trick of the Light Theatre

Image: Philip Merry, Axolotl Photography



³⁶ Blackburn, Stephen. "Respect the Work" Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre. Playmarket. 2016

happens within the minds, imagination and memory of the watching audience... [this] increased engagement marks a deepening and extending of the children's knowledge and ownership – creative, imaginative, emotional and technical – of the performance.³⁷

Sacha Copland, artistic director of Java Dance Theatre, says that, for her, quality is defined as connection, relevance and accessibility:

If art is 'perfect' but the audience can't connect to it or access it then it is of low quality. The quality of art isn't fixed because it depends on its connection to the audience. Does the work find a meeting point with the huge range of personalities, cultures, identities and experiences in the audience in some way? Does it make their world and its possibilities feel bigger or smaller? We use dance and live music and theatre as a form of communication, and we constantly ask ourselves and others – what is the most exciting, relevant, expressive way to communicate a particular idea? How do we use dance and music to communicate the difficult and intangible things that are hardest to communicate in everyday life?

Dirt and Other Delicious Ingredients

– Java Dance Theatre

Image: Stephen A'Court

³⁷ Reason, Matthew. *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre*. Trentham Books, 2010.



Australian TYA director Dave Brown, founder of The PaperBoats, an international platform for TYA collaboration, defines quality theatre for children as experiences which provide an antidote to the “clutter, banality and allure” of commercial culture:

*Quality theatre offers a powerful connection to children's inner lives. It is a place where they can share transforming experiences that can enrich them and sustain them. The theatre we create for children seeks optimism in humanity and honours the spirit of resilience that can endure and overcome difficulties.*³⁸

Planning for Excellence

Although excellence is highly subjective, there are several key areas that practitioners might consider and question when programming, creating and performing work for/by/with young people:

- **Challenging the canon – fairy tales and pantomimes**

It is worth thinking about the appeal of these narratives for a New Zealand audience: are these [arguably conservative and predominantly Eurocentric] stories those we should be continuing to tell in modern Aotearoa? If quality in TYA is closely related to audience engagement, then surely TYA in Aotearoa needs to be relevant to the contemporary lives, concerns and perspectives of young New Zealanders?

Young people, like their adult counterparts, deserve opportunities to experience theatre intended purely to entertain. However, in their book *Theatre, Children and Youth*, Jed H. Davis and Mary-Jane Evans contend that most fairy tales are disempowering and not about children at all; they are about young adults, and often promote blatantly sexist and old-fashioned attitudes:

Sleeping Beauty does nothing to bring about the denouement of

³⁸ Brown, Dave. “Re: Hi.” Email received by Kerry Palmer, 18 Oct. 2019.

*her story – it happens to her. An active protagonist makes things happen and addresses the conflict of the story directly. This is empowering for a child audience.*³⁹

The regular programming of well-known, Eurocentric fairy tales and pantomimes (typically based on fairy tales) does little to expose children to new ideas and new stories, and does not respond to New Zealand's multicultural society and the wide range of cultural stories that exist in the whakapapa⁴⁰ of many New Zealand families. Even when companies give fairy tales a cultural 'twist' or remaking, it is arguable that stories of passive damsels and dashing princes have relevance for young New Zealanders.

There are, of course, exceptions: *Polly Hood in Mumuland*, for instance, a 2009 collaboration between Auckland Theatre Company and the Pacific Institute of Performing Arts, exuberantly celebrated contemporary Pasifika culture in the way it retold the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

There are also fine examples of productions that are, in essence, original new works, but tap into elements of fairy tales and folklore. In 2016, The House that Dan Built, a New South Wales performing arts organisation for girls and young women, drew on *Little Red Riding Hood* to create *Tender Young Creatures*, an exploration of the sense of threat felt by young women when walking at night. The performance featured 100 girls in red hoods.⁴¹ *Gerda's Room*, an award-winning production by Russian company Osobnyak Theatre, is based on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, but deconstructs Gerda's story to explore themes of loss, memory and letting go, for ages 12+.⁴² New Zealand playwright Ralph McCubbin Howell, co-founder of Trick of the Light Theatre, drew on Icelandic folklore to heighten the sense of malevolence in *Tröll*, a play about a

³⁹ Davis, Jed H & Mary-Jane Evans. *Theatre, Children and Youth*. Anchorage Press, 1987.

⁴⁰ Lineage

⁴¹ <https://www.thehousethatdanbuilt.com/shows>

⁴² https://osobnyak.ru/english_version_gerda_s_room



Pourakahua

– Taki Rua Productions’

Te Reo Māori Season

Image: Philip Merry

boy targeted by online bullies.⁴³ These productions are not updates of traditional stories; they are contemporary new works exploring themes relevant to young audiences today.

It is also worth noting that adaptations of the pūrakau or myths and legends that are connected directly to the cultures of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific, such as Auckland Theatre Company’s Mythmakers show *The Eel and Sina*, can be a critical and important way for young people to understand their identity and history.

- **Attracting a new audience – taking a risk on original material**

How can we attract an audience with new work, rather than defaulting to the idea that parents and schools will only come to shows based on fairy tales and well-known children’s books?

Jenny Wake, artistic director of Calico Young People’s Theatre, spent years developing original new works for touring to schools, but, when it comes to school holiday productions, says: “It’s particularly hard to get audiences to new work with unfamiliar titles – adults tend to take children to shows with titles they recognise, e.g., based on fairy

⁴³ <https://www.trickofthelight.co.nz/shows/troll>



The Whale Rider (2022)
- Tim Bray Theatre Company
Photo by David Rowland /
One-Image.com

tales, classic books or TV shows, making it extremely risky to develop original new work." Tim Bray, QSM, who regularly programmes adaptations of best-loved children's books for Tim Bray Theatre Company, says: "I would love to create and present original work, but the company is so reliant on box office income to survive that we need to programme well-known titles to guarantee the audience numbers required."

An important difference between children's books and fairy tales is that the content in children's books is often more child-centred than in fairy tales, with many protagonists in children's books being children, such as twelve-year-old Kahu Paikea Apirana in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, and the little boy in Margaret Mahy's *A Lion In The Meadow*, which can lead to greater empowerment for children. Well-known titles such as these, with ready-made, wide appeal, can create a framework for box office success.

However, this raises the question: where is the place for new and original stories in Aotearoa? Are we destined to have a finite number of 'traditional stories' that companies make into plays because audiences are familiar with them? How does this open young people up to new, contemporary, cultural experiences and stories? This is a

dilemma. Without a solid audience base, TYA companies are unlikely to survive and therefore cannot develop original works. However, in order to deliver TYA of the breadth and depth our young people deserve, companies need to present original work.

Clearly there needs to be a re-examining of the way productions are marketed, to encourage children, parents, and educators to take risks on shows with titles that are unfamiliar to them. And when TYA companies present high-quality, audience-engaging, original work, we owe it to our sector and our young people to spread the word and loudly proclaim their success.

- **Not shying away from dark and deep material – how scary is too scary?**

The world can be a frightening place. So, should we shield young audiences from the harsher realities of life in the themes we explore in our work for young people?

Celebrated children's author Morris Gleiztman, who has written books encompassing topics once considered taboo for young readers, such as homosexuality, living with AIDS and Holocaust survival, believes that offering children challenging topics is healthy:

Our young people live in a world where they can no longer be cotton-balled away from the many aspects of the world that cause us adults deep shame and unhappiness. We've bequeathed them a media-drenched world. ... If we slam the lid down on certain areas of the world that they [children] inhabit and already know a fair bit about ... well, there's nothing more fearful for a young person than to see that an adult they trust and love just doesn't want to talk about some aspects of life. That's monsters-under-the-bed time.⁴⁴

In considering traditionally 'adults-only' subjects in TYA, UK

⁴⁴ Gleiztman quoted in [Kelsey- Sugg, Anna. "Children's Books Are Tackling Dark and Taboo Topics. Morris Gleiztman Says That's Nothing to Be Afraid Of." ABC News.](#)

playwright/director David Wood suggests that “there are few areas that are totally out of bounds, save those where children are incited to violence or intolerance.”⁴⁵ However, he maintains it is important not to set out to frighten and disturb children just for the sake of it, the age range of the audience must be considered, and practitioners have the responsibility to treat sensitive issues carefully.

Some themes are best tackled in consultation with outside experts. *Speed of Light*, a play by Angie Farrow, deals with themes related to youth suicide. It was commissioned by Calico Young People’s Theatre for a national tour to secondary schools, for Years 11-13. The script was based on extensive research into youth mental health, developed in consultation with mental health professionals, young people, teachers and school counsellors, and trialled from first draft stage with senior high school drama students who performed rehearsed readings followed by intense discussion and feedback. Once the play was ready for production, promotional and follow-up resource material was sent to school counsellors, to ensure on-site support was available for students after the performance.



Speed of Light
- Calico Young People’s Theatre
Image: Calico Theatre

Death can be a difficult subject to deal with in TYA, particularly for young children. However, it is not necessarily one that should be avoided because of doubts and questions that may arise from a young audience. The late Peter Wilson, founder of Little Dog Barking

⁴⁵ Wood, D. and Grant, J. *Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting*. London: Faber and Faber. (1997)

Theatre Company, adapted *Death, Duck and the Tulip*, a book about death and dying by Wolf Erlbruch, for audiences aged 2 and over.

“Children do experience life and death in their early years,” he said. “We create work that is of their world.”⁴⁶



Duck, Death and the Tulip
- *Little Dog Barking*
Image: *Little Dog Barking*

In 2015 I directed a production of *Kiwi Moon* for Capital E National Theatre for Children. It was based on the book by Gavin Bishop and aimed at audiences aged 2–7 years. The central character is a little white kiwi whose mother is killed by a kuri (dog). We chose to stage this scene so that the kuri and Mother Kiwi had an intense on-stage fight and, when the kuri was frightened off, Mother Kiwi limped into her burrow. The next day, Little Kiwi delivered his Mum a tasty worm for breakfast. The audience saw the worm go into the burrow and then, seconds later, come out again. This made Little Kiwi sad and he packed up his things and left the burrow – implying that Mother Kiwi was dead. Many children in the audience understood this and openly commented on the fact that the mother had died. However, in post-show discussions, other children in the audience said they believed that the Mother Kiwi was actually ‘just sleeping’. These observations suggested to me that children were creating their own narratives in relation to the story,

⁴⁶ Wilson quoted in Wake, Jenny. “Theatre to Schools, or Schools to Theatres?” *Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre*. Playmarket. 2016

each according to their own ability to understand or cope with the idea that Mother Kiwi could be dead, and our approach allowed for these personal responses.

Young people are exposed to distressing issues, events and circumstances in their own lives, and theatre can give them opportunities to process troubling thoughts from a safe distance – through the experiences of characters in the story. Shows such as *Kiwi Moon* and *Duck, Death and the Tulip* open children and adults to conversations about some of the more challenging aspects of life.

Te Rākau Hua O Te Wao Tapu Trust has never shied away from difficult or confronting content. They've been working with rangatahi for many years, in schools, Marae and youth justice residencies, and see theatre as a tool for change. Jamie McCaskill, in an article for Playmarket Annual 2016, describes Te Rākau as the “beacon of light for hundreds of rangatahi who turned their lives around because of the experiences Te Rākau provided them with and the power of telling their own stories.”⁴⁷ Te Rākau's Jim Moriarty says: “We motivate change, question apathy and challenge indifference through this thing that we all love called theatre.”⁴⁸

- **Audience interaction/participation – can it be integrated in an authentic and non-patronising way?**

The question of audience participation can be quite polarising. In theatre for children, it can range from booing the villain to becoming characters in the story. Below are some perspectives on audience participation from scholars and practitioners.

- 1) Gareth White, a UK lecturer in applied theatre, examines the ‘aesthetics of invitation’ in his book *Audience Participation in Theatre*. Not specifically aimed at a young audience, the book is, however, a comprehensive interrogation of the practice and

⁴⁷ McCaskill, Jamie. “Theatre is a Hui” Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre. Playmarket. 2016

⁴⁸ Moriarty quoted in McCaskill, Jamie. “Theatre is a Hui” Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre. Playmarket. 2016

purpose of audience participation and highlights the complexities involved when inviting an audience to participate. White defines audience participation as “the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of a performance.”⁴⁹ In TYA, audience participation is a common practice and involves a variety of methods of encouraging the audience to participate such as calling out, coming onto the stage, solving problems and assisting characters.

- 2) Writer/Director David Wood views audience participation as an important but optional ingredient of children’s theatre. In pantomime he believes that it is used often to galvanise a family audience, which is fun, “but often the aim seems to be to get the audience to shout as loudly as possible and create a diversion from the story.” Wood adds that audience participation works better when it is not asked for but comes spontaneously: “Simple warnings – ‘He’s behind you’ – work well, but they work better if they are not directly asked for ... far better for the warning to come spontaneously as a result of the audience being unable to contain their desire to be helpful.” He remarks that when writing or directing a TYA play, even though sometimes audience participation would be irrelevant or out of place, it is worth considering as “young children suffer few inhibitions when given the chance to join in.”⁵⁰
- 3) In a New Zealand context, Jenny Wake discusses seeing a production of perennial audience favourite, Spike Milligan’s *Badjelly the Witch*, loaded with hyped, panto-style audience participation. During the performance the children seemed to be engaged, screaming out warnings such as “he went that way” at the top of their lungs. However, after the show, Wake overheard an adult audience member commenting to a young

⁴⁹ White, Gareth. *Audience Participation in Theatre*, Palgrave Macmillan. (2013)

⁵⁰ Wood, D. and Grant, J. *Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting*. London: Faber and Faber. (1997)

companion: "You really enjoyed that, didn't you?" The child shrugged and replied, "It was ok." From this, Wake surmised that although he, along with the other children, had been evidently participating vocally and seemingly enjoying it, the experience itself was hollow: "It wasn't a rich experience by any stretch of the imagination in terms of their participation."⁵¹

- 4) Matthew Reason says it is "possible to get away with a lot through audience participation, loudness and effectively driving your audience into a state of distracted hyperventilation ... it is possible to get away with a lot and deliver very little if a production is immediately diverting." He argues: "It does not say much about our perceptions of the abilities of young children if we settle for baseline productions. It suggests that for young audiences it is not necessary to do more because children either do not need more, would not understand greater subtlety, or would not actively appreciate greater variety."⁵²
- 5) UK TYA director and academic David Broster remarks that audience participation is a characteristic that has been particularly developed in TIE: "The synthesis of educational thinking, childhood development and theatre practice ultimately resulted in a [TIE] participatory aesthetic that located audience participation as an integral part of both process and product." With Magic Attic Theatre, he has explored the convention of audience participation extensively and concludes that "when handled sensitively the experience of being involved and especially physically involved in the action is an exciting one and a positive addition to an otherwise end-on experience."⁵³
- 6) Australian company Polyglot Theatre describes its brand of

⁵¹ Wake quoted in Warrington, Lisa: "Shalakazap! - empowerment in young people's theatre. Aotearoa/New Zealand: an interview with Jenny Wake of Calico Theatre." *Australasian Drama Studies* 47. October 2005.

⁵² Reason, Matthew. *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre*. Trentham Books, 2010.

⁵³ Broster, David. "Being There" *Theatre for Young Audiences: A Critical Handbook*, edited by Tom Maguire and Karian Schuitema. Institute of Education Press, 2012.

theatre as “child’s play” and states on its website that its mission is “to make innovative and daring theatre which provides children everywhere the opportunity for imagination and adventure through participation.”⁵⁴ The company offers a range of shows that immerse children in creative play: *Invisible Orchestra*, for instance, features a circle of chairs with musical cushions and the audience makes music together; in *Paper Planet*, the audience enters a forest made of cardboard and creates creatures, plants and costumes from paper; during *Ants*, human-sized ants go silently about their work and children spontaneously join in.



Ants – Polyglot Theatre

Image: Jenny Wake

- 7) Sacha Copland, of Java Dance Theatre, believes interaction has moved “light years beyond ‘yelling stuff out’. Children have such visceral responses in their bodies and are often more connected to their bodies than adults. This is why LIVE work is so important.” She cites children’s engagement during *Sandscape*, an absorbing show by South African company Magnet Theatre, as a beautiful example of tactile interaction, exploring the texture, sound and movement of sand.⁵⁵

Audience participation/interaction is an element that needs to be carefully curated and integrated into the overall dramaturgy of the

⁵⁴ <https://polyglot.org.au>

⁵⁵ <http://www.dialogueforcommunity.com/2017/06/the-sights-and-sounds-of-sandscape/>

piece. Rather than being inserted as a staple of children's theatre, and simply inciting the audience to be as loud as possible or answer questions that the actors clearly already know the answers to, it needs to serve as a method to advance the story or audience experience in a meaningful way.

- **Questioning the adage that children have short attention spans**

Many TYA productions rely on loud, colourful, fast-paced action to keep children engaged, and audience restlessness is often put down to the notion that children have short attention spans. Do they really, or is this just an excuse for failure to truly engage a young audience?

Jenny Wake based her 1994 production *Shalakazap!* on her philosophy that primary-age children can be fully engaged and attentive throughout an hour-long production. In conversation with New Zealand academic Lisa Warrington, she explained: "*Shalakazap!* is designed to foster a positive attitude towards maths by drawing audiences into a series of problem-solving activities built into the plot of the play. Its objective was to offer curriculum-related material without theatrical compromise."⁵⁶

I was an inaugural cast member in the production which toured around New Zealand in 1994. We performed nearly 100 times and my memory of performing this show is the way it consistently engaged the audience for the full fifty minutes. A year after we performed *Shalakazap!*, I revisited a school with a new production. I was proudly presented with a full-scale drawing and map of my *Shalakazap!* character's journey, demonstrating the lasting impact the show had had on this child. Not only did she recognise me as the actor from the previous year, but she remembered in detail my character's journey, demonstrating a level of enhanced engagement with the play a full year after she had viewed it.

⁵⁶ Wake quoted in Warrington, Lisa: "Shalakazap! - empowerment in young people's theatre. Aotearoa/New Zealand: an interview with Jenny Wake of Calico Theatre." *Australasian Drama Studies* 47. October 2005.

The emotional journey the children were taken on in *Shalakazap!* was delivered through Wake's principles of structuring the show so that the children were engaged in varied and meaningful ways. These included active participation through solving riddles and mathematical challenges, as well as watching and listening. Audience participation, while often spontaneous, was integrated into the action – the play could not be resolved without the intellectual and physical involvement of the audience and was cleverly structured so that the actors could take the audience from complete uproar and excitement to absolute quiet and suspense. The use of theatrical structure and spectacle, such as a part of the set revealing itself like magic at the successful climax of each noisy, problem-solving activity, was, in my opinion, one of the greatest strengths of the production.

These moments – when the audience switched in an instant from active participation to surprise and wonderment as the set unfolded – sustained the children's attention and suggested genuine engagement with the story and the way it was being told.



Shalakazap!
- Calico Young People's Theatre
Image: Calico Theatre

For younger children, building opportunities into a performance for them to sing along or get up for a stretch or wriggle can be helpful. Lynne Cardy, artistic director at Capital E National Theatre for Children, recalls seeing "a wonderful dance show in Scotland for 5- to 6-year-olds, seated on the floor, on the same level as the performers. Before

the show they were instructed by the stage manager to feel free to 'respond how you like. Move, clap, dance, talk, laugh, wriggle... but no pitch invasions! Oh, and be happy!' And they did."

Like the characters in a play, audiences can be taken on a journey which sometimes engages their emotions, at other times their intellect, bodies or senses: moments of heart-thumping, edge-of-seat suspense, relieved by laugh-out-loud surprises; elements of mystery that compel children to be alert for visual and aural clues and to work out connections in their heads; scenes evoking intense feelings of sadness, joy or empathy; musical, humorous or visually enthralling breaks that allow time out from complex storytelling; exhilarating action sequences and quieter, slower, more reflective scenes.

If spontaneous participation and interaction are signs of a happily engaged audience, so too are sustained stillness and silence. When you can hear a pin drop in an auditorium full of children, you can be sure they are deeply absorbed in the performance.

- **Adult actors playing children – authenticity in TYA**

In her work (and also in her discussion about *Shalakazap!* with Lisa Warrington) Jenny Wake interrogates the practice of adults playing children, noting that it can lead to actors "falling into choosing clichéd physical attributes: a sort of innocence or cuteness or squeaky voice or toes turned in."

"Every single kid thinks they're pretty big, because they're older than they were a year ago and so they think they're pretty grown up and mature [...] So, you don't want to come and see some actor come along and take the mickey out of you in effect by doing the cutesy, pigeon-toed thing."⁵⁷

To avoid such clichéd and patronising portrayals, Wake directs her adult actors not to *try* to be kids, but to *be* kids by interpreting the

⁵⁷ Wake quoted in Warrington, Lisa: "Shalakazap! - empowerment in young people's theatre. Aotearoa/New Zealand: an interview with Jenny Wake of Calico Theatre." *Australasian Drama Studies* 47. October 2005.

situation of the play, the circumstances, the actions and the language used, rather than putting on some sort of physical persona.

Caryl Jenner, founder of London's Unicorn Theatre Company, was conscious of the way children responded more readily to truthful theatre. She issued a booklet to all new company members with the following instructions for actors:

Great imaginative ability is required to attain belief in the fantastic characters and situations found in infant plays, and this is essential if you are to play them with conviction in a technique which demands frequent direct contact with the audience, as well as fellow actors. Absolute care must be taken when first approaching these plays in rehearsal not to fall into the trap of "talking down" to the children. The actor must see through the children's eyes, and play with the directness and simplicity that he would find from the child itself.⁵⁸

Jenner professed that it takes a very perceptive person to get into the mind of a child and that, all too often, adults underestimate children's comprehension. Similarly, David Wood discusses how TYA actors need to respect children, and have flexibility and commitment by being able to "share with the audience a genuine delight in the story being presented and find a real pleasure in the fantasy and the magic." He says they should also avoid "playing a role over the heads of children in the audience towards the adults, as if to say 'Look how clever I am at entertaining children.'" ⁵⁹

UK director Vicky Ireland describes her strategies for helping actors achieve authentic portrayals of children:

At the start of the production I take my cast to visit a local school so they can meet the age range they're playing and talk to the

⁵⁸ Graham, Tony." Building-Based Theatre. Theatre for Children and Young People: 50 Years of Professional Theatre in the UK, edited by Stuart Bennett. Aurora Metro, 2005,

⁵⁹ Wood, D. and Grant, J. Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting. London: Faber and Faber. (1997)

children, reacquaint themselves with young people. When we return the actors often reproduce the behaviours they've seen, but then we work to tone this down. The challenge is not to act 'being a child' but keep the spirit inside and let it inform your behaviour.⁶⁰

- **Consulting with young people**

A sure-fire way to ensure that your work is connecting with and engaging young people is to spend time with young people (of the target audience age range) during the development and rehearsal stages of a new production.

German scholar Wolfgang Schneider puts it succinctly:

[W]ho knows what the young and the very young already know, what they want from theatre, and what stories would be sensible to tell? The best thing to do is stay in contact, initiate communication, understand the performing arts as a process between actor and the spectator.⁶¹

When it comes to understanding young people's interests, concerns, powers of perception and perspectives, young people themselves are the experts. If a production is to be age-appropriate, engaging and relevant to young people's lives and experiences, it pays to consult with them early and often in the development and production processes, not just as a trial audience towards the end of rehearsals.

PAYPA Resource #2 will focus entirely on engaging with young people during TYA development and production, including strategies for establishing meaningful dialogue and methods for gaining genuine critical response.

⁶⁰ Ireland, Vicky. "Working with a Children's Writer - a Directors Journey." Theatre for Children and Young People: 50 Years of Professional Theatre in the UK, edited by Stuart Bennett. Aurora Metro, 2005

⁶¹ Schneider, Wolfgang. "Enabling Cultural Participation." IXYPILONZETT Magazine for Children and Young Peoples Theatre, no. 01 2014, 2014

- **Clarifying the intended audience**

We do our audiences a disservice when we advertise productions for a wide or unspecified age range. In the primary school age range, for instance, children aged 5 and 10 are at very different stages in their physical, mental, social and emotional development, while the interests and concerns of young people in their early teens can be very different to those of teens nearing school-leaving age.

Christchurch-based Cubbin Theatre Company specialises in theatre experiences for children under 5. The company developed *Up and Away* specifically for 'babies and their grown ups', while other shows cater to toddlers or preschoolers. Artistic director Melanie Luckman says: "90 percent of our brain develops before we turn three. So that's a lot of change in a short time! Elements such as pace, repetition, volume, intimacy, as well as more obvious things like story complexity and language, can be dramatically different in a show for one year olds compared to a show for two year olds. When an artistic experience is developmentally specific, the audience member will feel relaxed, receptive, and genuinely engaged, meaning that their neural pathways will be firing and growing. Experiences that lead to distraction, boredom or overstimulation don't offer these benefits. We owe it to our young people to give them art that is genuinely engaging for their stage of life."

Up and Away

– Cubbin Theatre Company

Image: Cubbin Theatre Company



Clarifying the intended age range for a production is a way of respecting the audience. Twelve-year-olds, for example, may feel quite miffed to find themselves at a show pitched to 5- to 12-year-olds if they deem it to be beneath them; however, if the show has been clearly advertised for 5- to 8-year-olds, they may view it differently, satisfied that, as they are not the target audience, the performers are not talking down to them. Narrowing the specified target age range for a show can allow parents, educators and young people to make informed choices and, just as importantly, help theatre-makers to focus their work age-appropriately.

Some shows, however, do genuinely appeal to a wide age range. Danish theatre company Gruppe 38 offers theatre for 'adults and children', but specifies a minimum recommended age for each show – 5 or 6 years for some, 7, 8 or 9 for others.⁶² New Zealand company Trick of the Light Theatre also develops work for an intergenerational audience, stating on their website that the recommended audience for *The Griegol* is "brave children and lovers of atmospheric theatre", while *The Bookbinder* is for "curious children and adventurous adults", and *The Road That Wasn't There* is for "adults and older children."⁶³ These hugely successful shows are just as compelling for adults as they are for children.

- **Considering scenography – don't just chuck a sheet over it!**

When creating quality TYA, it is important to acknowledge not just the way the work is presented by the performers, but also the associated design elements, including scenery, lighting, props, puppets and costumes. The outdated practice of seeing work for children performed on stages cluttered by beautifully designed adult theatre sets with sheets thrown over them, with a few minimal scenic elements added, suggests a deficiency of care and implies that adult productions take priority over work for young audiences.

⁶² <https://www.gruppe38.dk/en/productions/>

⁶³ <https://www.trickofthelight.co.nz/shows>

Perhaps, given the way that young children are often drawn to pictures, colours and design before words, and their ability to use their visual imaginations creatively and extensively, scenography (the design elements) could be considered more important than the narrative of a play. David Wood suggests that “design is an integral part of a children’s production. It demands considerably more invention and imagination than might be required for an adult play.”⁶⁴

- **Choice of venue – prioritising the audience experience**

The choice of venue for a production can have a significant impact on the quality of the theatre experience for a young audience.

Typically, TYA is best suited to intimate venues. It’s disheartening to sit in the middle of a huge auditorium designed for symphony orchestra performances, or in a venue with poor sightlines, and hear the tell-tale sounds of restlessness that start with the children at the back and creep inexorably forward, until even the children in the front rows are distracted from an otherwise highly engaging performance. On the other hand, performing in a setting where actors’ voices are drowned out by traffic noise or children are distracted by unrelated activity nearby can be equally detrimental to audience engagement.

Some might argue that high-quality TYA can only be achieved in a traditional theatre venue, where young audiences can be offered the full theatrical experience, cocooned from the outside world, and where lighting, sound and special effects can work their true magic. KC Kelly, founder of Ensemble Impact, a company that toured high schools throughout Aotearoa, counters that young audiences can connect with a powerful performance lacking any of the usual trappings of theatre: “Actors can do it – a person standing in front of you can change your reality.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Wood, D. and Grant, J. *Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting*. London: Faber and Faber. (1997)

⁶⁵ Kelly quoted in Wake, Jenny. “Theatre to Schools, or Schools to Theatres?” *Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre*. Playmarket. 2016

For many young people, theatres seem like alien environments. Rachel Sears, former education manager at The Court Theatre, says: “I know confident, intelligent young people who are nervous about going to box office and picking up a ticket.”⁶⁶

For very young children, theatres can seem dark and scary. The late Peter Wilson, artistic director of Little Dog Barking, created theatre for traditional venues, but also advocated for theatre to be performed in children’s own spaces – familiar places where they feel confident and open to new experiences: “The stuff we do in early childhood centres is specially written for those centres. It doesn’t require a lot of lights, but it does have a set, and good workmanship in the props and costumes – the quality of the work still has to shine through... Good theatre can happen anywhere. I think we should create as many art spaces as we can for children.”⁶⁷

Some International TYA companies create black-box theatre spaces in school gyms, bringing their own lighting and black-out curtains. Others travel lighter – with a suitcase of props and a dynamic performing style, they’re ready to play in any classroom or village square. Sacha Copland, artistic director of New Zealand company Java Dance Theatre, believes that “young people are particularly engaged when you transform their own familiar spaces (e.g., a bus or a classroom). Extraordinary things happening in ordinary familiar places resonates with their own imaginative worlds.”

Whatever the venue, a priority for Cubbin Theatre Company is to ensure that adults and children are as comfortable in the performance space as possible. Artistic director Melanie Luckman explains: “Stressed parents make for stressed kids. This is especially important for our age group as often we are a child's first experience of coming to the theatre. That's why parking, pram access, feeding

⁶⁶ Sears quoted in Wake, Jenny. “Theatre to Schools, or Schools to Theatres?” Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre. Playmarket. 2016

⁶⁷ Wilson quoted in Wake, Jenny. “Theatre to Schools, or Schools to Theatres?” Playmarket Annual New Zealand Theatre. Playmarket. 2016

and changing areas and even the ticketing experience are just as important as the set and lighting.”

It can be tempting to prioritise the production budget and book a large theatre to maximise potential ticket sales, or a non-traditional venue to minimise costs, but it’s the audience experience – from before arrival to after departure – that should take precedence in venue choices. Ultimately, prioritising the audience makes good box office sense: it’s not so much the quality of the production that will have audiences spreading the word and returning for the next production – it’s the quality of the audience experience.

- **Accessibility, diversity and inclusion – quality performing arts experiences for all**

Young people across the socio-economic spectrum, with and without disabilities, have equal rights to access high-quality performing arts experiences. Best practice in theatre for young audiences takes into account the many different barriers to access.

Financial accessibility is another factor to consider in choosing a venue. An expensive theatre venue can impact ticket prices, while a centralised venue can add transport and parking costs for school groups or families, putting a trip to the theatre out of reach for many young New Zealanders. Taking theatre to young people’s own spaces – such as schools, early childhood centres, marae, churches, libraries or other community centres – helps lower financial barriers, while touring to these

Kiwi Moon
- Capital E National
Theatre for Children
Image: Capital E



spaces in regional centres and rural communities goes some way towards addressing geographic inequities.

Of course, whatever the venue, it must be physically accessible to all, including disabled performers. It's worth highlighting accessibility front and centre on your website, so it's clear that everyone is welcome. It helps, too, to provide images or video of the venue on your website, to help neurodiverse children and adults prepare themselves for their visit to an unknown space.

Tim Bray Theatre was the first theatre company in Aotearoa to offer NZ Sign Language Interpreted shows and, since then, has also offered Audio Described and Sensory Relaxed performances during the run of every production for many years. The company's website lists '[Accessible Performances](#)' on the main menu and offers good, brief descriptions of each of these.

Arts Access Aotearoa is an organisation dedicated to improving access to the arts for those experiencing barriers to participation, including performers and audience members. Entering terms such as 'relaxed performance' in the search box on [Arts Access Aotearoa's website](#) throws up links to a wealth of useful online resources, such as an excellent US article titled [How 'Relaxed Performances' are Transforming Theater Experiences Across the Country](#) and a practical US guide titled [Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice](#). Arts Access Aotearoa's [Access, Inclusion and Participation Advisor](#) is a first point of contact for performing arts organisations and practitioners wanting to become more accessible and inclusive in their practice. Developing your own Accessible Policy is a good starting point.

Marketing materials, too, need to be accessible, with legible fonts (minimum 12 point) and, ideally, NZSL interpretation and captioning added to video content. Audio description may also be needed for videos, while adding Alt text (used by screen reader software) to photos and images gives blind or visually impaired users a spoken description of the image when they select it. Ideally, have navigable

header links so people using screen readers can get to the content they are interested in easily, rather than having to read the whole newsletter or email. Likewise, have the content about accessible performances toward the top of any newsletter so it's not left to the very end. There's a lot more to be considered for accessible marketing and Arts Access Aotearoa can assist here.

Many young New Zealanders struggle with issues related to neurodivergence, disability or cultural, racial or gender identity, and grow up with a crushing sense that they are different, outsiders in their own communities or less valued than others. To see themselves positively reflected in a production in which the performers or protagonists are like them in some way, and their struggles are recognised within the work, can be profoundly validating and empowering.

One of PAYPA's core values is equality:

- **Ōritetanga**

We champion the right of all young people in Aotearoa to access performing arts experiences, regardless of nationality, cultural identity, ability, gender, sexual orientation, location, ethnicity, religion or socio-economic factors.

It will take an ongoing, sector-wide, collective commitment to make this right a reality for our young people.

Tim Bray Theatre Company's NZSL performance of Greedy Cat by Joy Cowley (2020) with Kelly Hodgins (Platform Interpreting)

Photo by David Rowland / One-Image.com



Quality Checklist

Questions to consider when assessing the quality of your own work for young audiences:

1. Artistic objectives

- Why am I making theatre for young audiences?
- Am I clear in my artistic objectives for this production?
- Why this particular production, in this particular way, for this particular audience, at this particular time?

2. Content

- Are the themes of this production relevant to young people in Aotearoa?
- Do the themes/ideas/issues in the production matter to young New Zealanders?
- Is the content age-appropriate for its intended audience?
- Is the content sensitive to the cultural diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand? Does the content engage with the cultural complexity of the audience?
- Has the content been developed in collaboration with young people and other relevant experts?
- Is the content well-structured in the production? Does it take the audience on a journey?

3. Creative team

- Have the key creatives (writer, designers, director, choreographer, composer, etc) applied strong craft skills to all aspects of the production?
- Have they sought or contributed specialist knowledge/expertise in making work specifically for young audiences?
- Do all members of the creative team have a clear understanding of the intended audience (age range, community context, etc)?
- Have all members of the creative team contributed and worked

to a unified vision?

- Has the team consistently prioritised audience engagement in creative choices and decisions?

4. Staging and scenography

- Does the chosen venue meet the needs of both the production and the intended audience? Does it allow for maximum audience engagement?
- Do all design elements (scenery, costumes, props, puppets, lighting, sound, etc) reflect a unified artistic vision?
- Do the design elements work together to create a unique world or mood for this production?
- Are all design elements well-designed and well-crafted?

5. Performances

- Is the rehearsal period long enough to enable the performers to do their best work?
- Is there clear evidence of a strong understanding of craft in the performances?
- Are the characters played with authenticity? Are they believable? Do they develop? Are they multi-faceted?
- Do the performers connect with and respond to each other?
- Do the performers connect with and respond to the audience confidently and respectfully?
- Are they performing especially for this special audience on this special day?

6. Audience engagement

- Are young people (the audience) taken seriously?
- Are they comfortable and at ease?
- Have NZSL,⁶⁸ Audio Described and Sensory Relaxed performances been offered?⁶⁹

⁶⁸ New Zealand Sign Language

⁶⁹ See <https://timbray.org.nz/accessible-performances/> for a definition of each of these terms

- Does the production captivate its audience? Are young audience members engrossed from beginning to end?
- If there is audience participation in the production, is it meaningful (or just hype)?
- Am I open to developing the work further based on how the audience responds to it?
- Will the production make a lasting impression or have a lasting impact on the audience?
- What will young people remember of this production in years to come? What difference will it make in their lives?

Summary

The question of what constitutes quality theatre by/for/with young audiences is a complex and subjective one. However, quality can begin to be measured through the examination of audience engagement, production values, aesthetic expectations, cultural context and the level of skill employed within each individual production.

As Sharpe and Lee assert,⁷⁰ “striving for excellence and innovation, being authentic, exciting, inspiring and engaging” does not have to mean being large, over-expressive, colourful, or speaking down to children; “ensuring a positive and inclusive experience, actively involving young people, enabling personal progression and developing belonging and ownership” doesn’t necessitate a patronising ‘who’s behind me?’ directive. All these qualities need to be developed carefully and rigorously throughout a dedicated rehearsal period.

I encourage practitioners to engage with young people whilst making work, to strive to create great art that lingers in the minds and

⁷⁰ Sharp, Caroline and Lee, Ben. Using Quality Principles in Work for, by, and with Children and Young People: Results of a Pilot Study (Draft Final Report). Slough: NFER, 2015.

hearts of children long after they have left the theatre and to value, respect and honour the audience regardless of their age.

If we are not interested in how children engage with [the work], then how seriously are we taking our audience in the theatre that we make for them? (Matthew Reason) ⁷¹



*Ralph McCubbin Howell with audience members
after a performance of The Bookbinder
- Trick of the Light Theatre*

Image: Jenny Wake

⁷¹ The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre, by Matthew Reason, Trenthem Books 2010