

National Cultural Policy Submission

David Young

Submitted: As an individual

I am a retired arts worker. Unfortunately, I found out about Minister Tony Burke's Town Hall meetings after the one in Hobart (where I live) had taken place. I also missed the deadline for the first round of submissions.

However, I would like to make some belated points about the sector of the arts that I worked in for over twenty years: young people's theatre (YPT), sometimes referred to as theatre-in-education.

I worked as a director and playwright in the field. Between 1973 and 1990, I worked as the artistic director of three of the best funded YPTs in Australia, I was the founding artistic director of a fourth, associate artistic director of a fifth and twice playwright-in-residence of a sixth. My plays have been performed by YPTs and by high schools around the country; two of them are published by Currency Press, Sydney, and two by Methuen Young Drama in the UK.

I was far from alone in having earned my living in this field of the arts in the 1970s and '80s. During those decades, there were young people's wings attached to each of the State Theatre Companies in Australia, as well as many independent YPTs. Some were funded to provide their work as a free service to schools in their home states. One example of this was Salamanca Theatre Company (STC) in Hobart, where I worked as artistic director from 1985 until 1990. In 1988 STC won the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award for excellence in the performing arts, this being only the fifth time the award had been presented; and STC was the first theatre company to win it, previous winners being a circus, two dance companies and two music companies. The quality of work produced by YPTs was well regarded in the broader industry, and produced by talented, experienced and respected artists.

Young people's theatre in the '70s and '80s was a well-funded sector of the arts, employing a large number of arts workers on long-term contracts. It was also served by its own 'Young People's Theatre Panel, a branch of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council. I sat on this committee, and also on its parent committee, the Drama Panel, for a number of years. Furthermore, the majority of the productions presented by the YPTs I ran were world premiers, and I'm pretty sure that the same was true of the other young people's theatres in Australia.

Today, I don't think that any government-funded YPTs remain in existence. There still remain a few youth theatres (in which young non-professional actors perform, directed by adults who may be paid for their services), but YPTs - in which all personnel, artistic and ancillary, are professional - seem to have died out completely, starved of funding by a succession of Coalition Governments since that of John Howard. Arena Theatre, Melbourne, where I was the inaugural artistic director from 1973 to 1975, seems to have been the last to go, winding up some time in the late 2010s (see <https://arenatheatre.com.au/our-history/> for the company's history).

I would appreciate the opportunity to make a case for reviving young people's theatre in Australia.

Many thanks,

David Young