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DARKENING THE LINES

In late 2005, Clare Carmody and I collaborated with a group of young people aged 8-12 in the devising of a new play that came to be known as *'I'm Ten…Does That Count?'*.Initiated by Titiana Varkopoulous and auspiced by current Artistic Director Fraser Corfield, the play was made over two school terms of workshops at Brisbane's Backbone Youth Arts in perhaps twenty sessions of two hours. The support of the Australia Council made the extended timeframe and staffing possible. But this article's not going to dwell on descriptions of that particular performance. It's the *process* we'll be drawing from, seeking handy hints with a twist of philosophy.

The aim was to conceptualise, devise, rehearse and present an original, non 'collage' performance created by 8-12 year olds. The kids described this as being a 'proper' play. That meant certain things to them that we'll explore later. Between being little kids and teenagers, between primary and high school, children of this age tend to be under-represented in Youth Theatre, with workshops (in our experience) emphasising skill-building through play rather than the creation of new performance works, devised by the children.

We wanted to subvert assumptions and raise expectations held about this age group as artists by group devising a new work with them. Devising is a tradition that's hard to pass on. The trouble with [and magic of] collaborative performance-making is that it's invented and owned each time by each group [and facilitator] that commits to it.
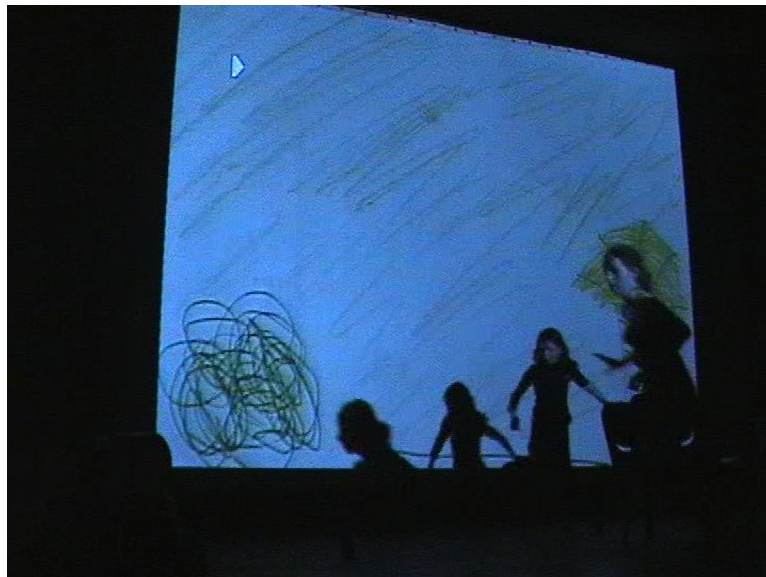
LOOKING FOR QUICKENINGS
We all hope for that exhilarating moment when a process gains its own momentum, and suddenly it starts rolling, seemingly of its own accord. One week you're meticulously planning each session, not sure what the next step is; and the next, things 'telescope' out and suddenly the work itself [and the skills required to develop it] dictate the process to come.

You can't literally anticipate, plan and build every component of a devised work at the outset. It would defeat the purpose. Every group, process, product, context, and parameters is different. However, there are commonalities: variables that can be balanced as you discover the performance you're creating with your group.

The familiar balancing act required between a *product* and the *process* of creation will be familiar to most of us.

How can a facilitator balance the over-arching task of eliciting and shaping the energy and experience of the young people with the need to create an authentic, cogent performance? You have to keep it moving, toggling between 'games that are work and work that is games' but also find ways of tracking the growths, changes and new connections between ideas that will become your play.

CHUNKS and STEPS

This group could come up with scenes at the drop of a hat – the **content** of these scenes, however, were commonly fantastical concoctions of witches and bizarre creatures.

A key difference between this age group and teens/adults in terms of **form** was that these children worked more naturally in terms of whole story 'chunks'. Each scene would often contain a whole 'three acts' within their borders. Characters would meet and conquer their adversary in narratively self-contained scenes. 'Proper' plays, however, tend to be comprised of linked scenes which focus on smaller steps of individual character/story development.

A 'PROPER' PLAY?

It was important to make our aims for the process, and aspirations for the product transparent, in a spirit of co-artistry.
The participants themselves had expressed their desire to do a 'proper play', and we came to understand that by this they meant a strong (linear) narrative throughline, as opposed to the more 'collage' effect of scenes un-linked by story, which they'd commonly presented at the end of a youth theatre 'term'.

It became clear once we began building the piece with this in mind, that the kids hade a natural knack for arranging things narratively, in terms of continuity, cause and effect and implied scenes. (that is, scenes that don't yet exist, but seem like they should).

We wanted to honour the natural working methods of the group, but were also keen to facilitate the kids making symbolic connections between their lived experience and this 'fantastical' realm – transparently tweaking the process so they're consciously developing a fictional world in which they're manipulating the dramatic representation of their lives, rather than skimming over the top of it on a surfboard of party pieces.

WHAT CHANGES?

As the characters and story began to emerge, we were able to sharpen the *form* of each scene without compromising the content. This was centred on strategic dramaturgical questioning built into the planning of each workshop and formation of tasks. Directing the inquiry of each devising task *before the scene exists* we found made for better 'building bricks' for our bigger story. Stakes were raised by insisting that characters had a 'choice to make'. By indicating that the character has 'something important to do today'.

Openly asking the simple question *'…this scene has a beginning and an end – <u>what changes</u> between those two points?'* has implications for the story arc of a play, even if you don't know 'what it's about' yet. It will help you all find out. When you lay these common dramaturgical tools at the feet of devisers, even young ones such as these, there are positive implications not only for each moment or scene, but for the entire potential play itself.

DRAWING MAPS

Naturally dealing with multiple protagonists (there could be no 'star' of a group devised work created by these kids!) you plant the seeds of a cogent story by linking character stories through devices of space, time, common experience or inciting incident.

The characters in our story lived in the same place, and this territory was literally 'mapped.' In a hands-on session of drawing and labelling, the components of the 'local area' were set out on a huge piece of paper.

Mapping the world of the play, and adding to it each week, had a number of functions – narratively, it enabled us to see how scenes related to each other in space, but on a very practical level, it meant that the play literally 'grew' before our own eyes. A week between sessions can a long time, so it was good to return each session and use the map as a reminder of where we were 'at' in the process.

At a later session, we planned a structured improvisation where a Steve Irwin style character would show us around this territory, now rendered in three dimensions by chairs and the description of the guide. It enabled the participants to be active agents in exploring the fictional context they'd created.

STORYBOARDING

The participant's natural enthusiasm for visual art was also a feature of the process. Each significant scene that was devised was selected and titled, its main properties set out in a brief note, and represented as a quick, often humorous sketch, all on the same A4 page.

Halfway through the process we had many scenes situated in different places. It was then a matter of getting on the floor and literally 'storyboarding' the entire play. It was here that the groups' complex understanding of multi-linear narratives became explicit.   This compilation of notes became our 'script'. A proper play has a 'script'. Doesn't it?

SCRIPT?
How do you balance the ephemeral nature of performances created by young people inspired by their own experience, with a desire to value and record them for posterity –as 'literature'? And does 'scripting' devalue meanings that come alive so beautifully in moments of improvisation and performance?
But these creators wanted a 'proper play', and bound up in that notion was a 'script'. So we made one, transforming the group's rough, scribbled notes amd drawings into a simple script. No new material was added. It contained no dialogue. We planned a 'work in progress showing' at the end of Term 1 which included some moments of performance, and some 'reading'.

But the first 'playreading' of this 'proper play' was anti-climactic and not as useful as the session prior to it. It was strange to be looking at pieces of paper instead of each other. It was, however, an important marker in the process. It signposted a transition from devising, where the focus was on invention, to a rehearsal phase where the emphasis is on interpretation. (Even if it is of the group's own material)

READABLE MOMENTS:
**BALANCING AUTHENTICITY WITH AESTHETIC REFINEMENT.**
Of course scenes continued to grow and change as the work developed, but there's often a feeling that things are getting more pedestrian as this 'rehearsal' phase gets underway.

Here the balance of the rough creativity that enables scenes to be quickly built has to give way to a focus on the skills that are going to allow those scenes to be enacted with clarity for an audience of the uninitiated. Some natural performers champ at the bit as opening night approaches. Others, younger, perhaps, are still grasping what it means to create a solid onstage presence. Participants who are used to event driven rather than character driven stories don't understand why they are obliged to suddenly 'act'. The facilitators wonder if it might be possible to have another term's worth of workshops simply to 'rehearse'.

LO-TECH WONDERMENT – DARKENING THE LINES
Towards the end of the process, the group started playing with video, shooting live sequences, and skilfully 'in-camera editing' scenarios that enhanced their story.

Inspired by their own storyboards and maps, the group created more drawings which were to be projected behind them as 'backdrops' for their performances. As the final workshop finished before we had a chance to do the dull job of capturing these drawings with the camera, Clare and I promised to do this filming later on.
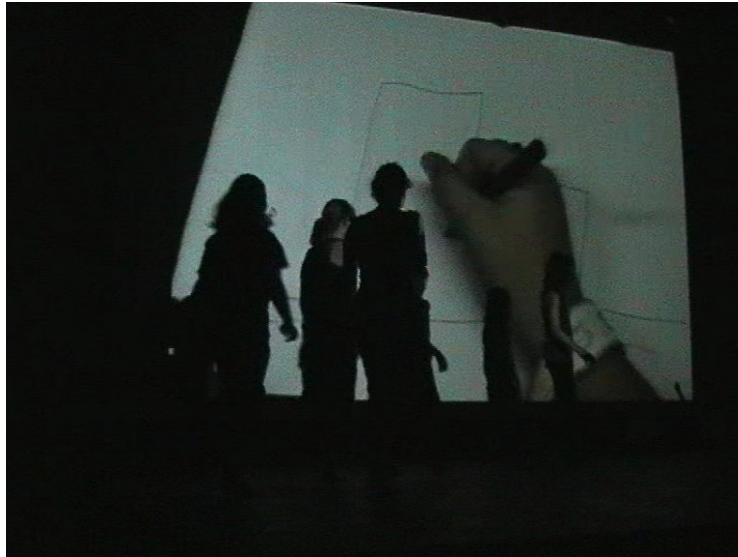
And we did. We blu-tacked these drawings to a wall, shot them with a video camera on a tripod, and transferred the images to a series of VHS tapes in order for the cast members to operate the 'multimedia' for their own show. It was lo-tech, but it worked.

As we were doing this, we noted that while some of the group's drawings were bold and well-defined, others were smaller and sketchier, and no re-framing or zooming in could bring their beauty into sharper relief.
When projected onto the stage, something of them would be lost.

As facilitators, working away from our group, we had the tools at our disposal that afternoon to 'improve' on some of the children's sketchy designs, to 'darken the lines'. But we decided not to.

These lines would have been darkened without their knowledge, approval or presence. Changing these drawings would, perhaps, have made them clearer in the moment of performance, but most certainly have altered their spirit.

Our decision was a philosophical one. This is a point of difference between honouring that which emerges from a legitimate group devising process; and the kind of theatre-making where the product is all that matters.

It's a difference that's hard to market, because it leaves the rough edges, the 'sketchy bits' in, rather than omitting or renovating them.

But the thing is, we'd rather watch patchy performances of original material devised by the kids than polished presentations of someone else's material any day. And this sense of ownership, to us, shines through the rough, often unready performances we've often watched at many youth theatre 'showings', and *'I'm Ten, Does That Count'* was no exception. It was rough, but it was definitely a 'proper play'. It was deep. Its component parts were deeply interconnected, rather than just jammed together.

I loved watching the young performers, standing, silhouetted by the glow of their own images on screen, watching their own product, as part of their own performance. It *was* 'proper.'

None of these kids' performances was going to win an Oscar, but then, why should they? Should we automatically associate traditional notions of 'stage presence' and 'acting skills' with learning (and value for parental investment)?

Because in some ways it's simpler to teach interpretive skills – the results are so easily observable – what it requires to *create* work collaboratively is less easy to articulate – it's a complex bundle of skills and behaviours that can't necessarily be taught or learnt in a direct way – they need to be experienced to have meaning. Should we devalue the learning of young artists by imposing adult standards of performance on their product, regardless of process?

Lines can be darkened, straightened and given definition - but the pen must be in the hand of the young artist. That's where we draw the line.