

Investigating Theatre Literacy in the *TheatreSpace*: the impact of learning, knowledge and experience of theatre performance on the engagement of young people in theatre.

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Background: The *TheatreSpace* project

TheatreSpace or *Accessing the Cultural Conversation* is the largest research project ever undertaken in Australia investigating the engagement of young people as audiences of theatre performance. An Australian Research Council Linkage longitudinal project in collaboration with the University of Melbourne, the University of Sydney and Griffith University; it included thirteen industry partners. The research was undertaken over four years 2008 – 2011 and investigated young people's responses to performances by leading performing arts companies and at cultural venues in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. The central research question asked: *What attracts, engages and sustains young people of school age and post-schooling, to theatre.*

There were two main research strands in the *TheatreSpace* project:

- i) Twenty-one individual case studies were conducted and later analysed in a national cross-case analysis. Each of the individual case studies focused on a particular performance event provided (and selected) by our partners. At these events young people were surveyed pre-show and interviewed post-show – either individually or in small groups.
- ii) a longitudinal component conducted across the three states (Victoria, NSW and Queensland)

Data from the first of these strands informs this paper.

Overall, in the *TheatreSpace* research, **2,779** young people were surveyed, and 818 of them were interviewed in small groups, one-on-one or over the phone, and followed up with **a further 151 interviews at least six months after the initial interviews**. Furthermore, **98** key informants drawn from the theatre makers, administrators and creative artists involved in the chosen performances were interviewed. Finally, teachers, principals and other staff were interviewed from **70** schools involved in the research.

The first stage of analysis involved identification of key themes about participation and engagement emerging from the interview responses. One of the themes that emerged at this point (and the focus of this paper) was the nature and role of theatre literacy in the engagement and responses of young people. This paper first considers the need to accept a complex understanding of the nature of literacy more broadly before discussing a definition of theatre literacy and its relationship to the *TheatreSpace* findings.

Defining critical Literacy

Despite recent attempts in Australia to continue to construct and measure literacy as a single global skill, we argue that the notion of critical literacy (Lankshear, 1994) must emphasise the ability to understand and make meanings that go beneath surface or literal interpretations of

texts (used here in its broadest sense). Building on Freire's work, Lankshear argues that a critically literate person must be able to interrogate and critique a text in terms of both the social and individual context and then challenge its underlying assumptions (Ewing, 2006).

Different art forms therefore need to be seen and understood as different kinds of literacies (Livermore, 2003). Such deep understanding of theatre performances is an important component of theatre literacy. The development of dramatic understanding and theatre language are widely accepted as axiomatic in research and writing in the field as important keys to a meaningful experience of the theatre. Throsby (2001) asserts that a taste for the artistic is cumulative, and that a person's enjoyment of any art form is closely related to gaining knowledge and understanding of that art form. These assertions are particularly evident in the literature focusing on youth audiences, where discussion about formal theatre learning and theatre experience in relation to young people appears frequently in Drama Education references (Wright and Garcia 1992, McLean 1996, Grady 2000, Prendergast 2004, Nicholson 2005)

Degrees of theatre literacy can be seen along a continuum, from minimal or no literacy to what we have termed a high level of literacy. At the most minimal/weak level the young person has limited ability to "read" the work and to make sense of their experience of the work. This is even more difficult where the form appears alien to them. For these young people, theatre does not connect them to questions of humanity and limits critical engagement. On the other hand we also saw a number of highly theatre literate young people. We also recognised that certain key qualities seemed to be present in the way these theatre literate young people spoke about and responded to performance. The most theatre literate young people used the languages of engagement and pleasure. They used their theatre knowledge to explain or analyse the work and their experience of it. They made comparisons and connections with other live performances. We also noted that they responded as theatre makers or practitioners, creating their own performance responses.

Towards an understanding of 'theatre literacy' as a secondary discourse

To explore this understanding of critical literacy in relation to theatre literacy, it proved useful to look at Gee's (1989) assertion that any form of literacy is the control of secondary discourses. Discourse is "...a socially-accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking and of acting "(p.1). He argues that oral language is the first universal discourse everyone acquires within their family but that secondary discourses are developed through association with institutions as well as the family – particularly schools, workplaces and the theatre (Gee 1989 p.6). These secondary discourses that are fundamental to human development and behaviour are either acquired or learned. Learning to be literate therefore involves the control of secondary uses of language (embodied, spoken, and written), i.e. uses of language in a secondary discourse. By this definition Theatre Literacy is a secondary discourse related specifically to the institution of theatre, and it was clear in the *TheatreSpace* research that mastery of the language of theatre – both description and analysis, was a key feature amongst young people with extensive experience and formal education in theatre.

The data from the school and university students and young adult participants included in the *TheatreSpace* research demonstrated that those who studied theatre as an academic

subject appeared to gain mastery of the field as critical and informed audiences. Their theatre literacy was learned and demonstrated through the use of language in secondary discourse. The following young adult interviewee had studied theatre and worked in the industry, and brought her understanding of theatre both the language and experience of the field.

To some extent yes if there's a particular play or style that I've studied obviously for me, you're learning and really I think it can add to the experience if you know what kind of things you're looking at, you know the history, things like if you know the history of the playwright .. I can certainly see that he was influenced by that aspect of his life.
(Female, early 20s)

Significantly, Gee (1989 p.6) argues: "Any discourse is for most people most of the time only mastered through acquisition, not learning." If this is the case, then young people master the discourses of theatre through active involvement as both participants and audience, and the evidence gathered through the *TheatreSpace* research confirms this. A number of young people who were interviewed in the case studies had participated in theatre performances in the industry and in the classroom. Some of these participants were clearly literate in their field in their ability to use the language and concepts of the secondary discourse of theatre according to Gee's (1989) definition.

If you study it and you know the meaning of – a lot of it is to do with body language as well – if you can read those signs then you're definitely going to read it at a different level to someone who doesn't have that knowledge. (Male Theatre Worker, early 20s))

What is Theatre Literacy?

One of the significant findings emerging from the research was the evidence that learning, knowledge and experience of theatre performance was a crucial factor in the engagement of young people in theatre. The data drawn from the 2779 surveys and 818 interviews indicated that young people consistently responded to theatre performances in identifiable, specific ways when they had extensive theoretical knowledge, practical understanding and experience as both performers and audience.

The *TheatreSpace* researchers categorised these young people as theatre literate, and identified four key characteristics of this form of literacy.

- use of technical theatre language or meta-language
- use of language of experience and pleasure
- comparisons with other live performances

- active participation in theatre-making or drama/theatre

Recent literature related to young people's experience of theatre confirms the findings of the *TheatreSpace* research that formal study or wide experience of theatre confers a level of access to, and understanding of, theatre performance. "One thing that was noticeable....was how even a slight variation in theatre going experience dictated the kinds of discussion produced... Clearly theatre-going is a learned activity, something that each individual needs to internalise in order to be able to concentrate on the performance... (Reason 2006 p.240).

The literature also suggests that theatre literacy is demonstrated by the ability to respond critically to a play, deconstructing both the text and the performance in depth using learned conceptual frameworks and the formal curriculum language of theatre studies. In addition, reflectivity and questioning are important components of literacy (Nicholson, 2004, Gangi, 1998).

However, whilst theatre literacy can be identified as having consistent and specific characteristics, it is essential to note that an audience's level of theatre literacy is too often perceived as a single, collective response, particularly when it is a group of school students or young adults.

The evidence gathered from the four years of research of the *TheatreSpace* project spanning the 14-30 year age range underlined the diversity and individuality of young audiences. As Freshwater (2009 pp.6-7) points out, not only is each audience member an individual, but "...differences are present within individuals as well as among them". At different times the gender, age and life experience of any individual may evoke different responses to a theatre event, regardless of the individual's theatre knowledge or performance expertise. This suggests that both the nature of the individual's response to a theatre event, and the articulation of this response, are crucial components of theatre literacy.

The large scale and longitudinal nature of the *TheatreSpace* research centring on young people as audience, enabled the researchers to explore this diversity of response in relation to the complex notion of theatre literacy, and to examine the significance of a range of other factors, including formal education, prior knowledge and extensive experience of theatre performance. The *TheatreSpace* research clearly indicates that it is possible to identify meaningful and useful understandings about the nature of theatre literacy, especially in relation to young people as audience, whilst acknowledging the significance of individual responses. In fact, the identifiable characteristics of theatre literacy that emerged from the data provided a structure to frame the research and analyse the significance of theatre literacy in the attendance and engagement of young people

Critical Theatre literacy – Experience AND Meta Knowledge

Most significant of all to an understanding of theatre literacy in the research was the nexus between formal learning and an active involvement in performance work. When both active theatre performance and audience experience were integral parts of formal studies, teenagers and young adults demonstrated control of critical discourses that enabled them to respond to

theatre performance in ways quite different from young people who had not studied theatre, or adults with theatre experience but no formal study in theatre. These research findings confirm Gee's (1989) definition of powerful literacy. "However, one cannot critique one discourse with another one unless one has meta-level knowledge in both discourses.....Thus powerful literacy almost always involves learning, not just acquisition"(p.9). Powerful theatre literacy amongst the young people in the *TheatreSpace* research emerged as a combination of both formal learning about theatre and the practice of it. One theatre worker who was a university graduate demonstrated a profoundly literate understanding of the theatre both as a field of practice and a conceptual framework.

It's different in that I enjoy, I enjoy it all immensely, but theatre is different because I've got the tools to analyse and interpret my visit and my journey with the performers there. I value it because it does have, I believe, the potential to influence and change and put a mark in your life (Male, early 20s)

Theatre Literacy and Aesthetic Knowing

Interestingly, the powerful theatre literacy evidenced in the *TheatreSpace* research appears to equate closely to Reimer's (1992) identification of 4 four ways of aesthetic knowing in relation to music, suggesting both close links between the experience of different art forms and the usefulness of Reimer's description. He describes the 4 ways as: *knowing of or within, knowing how, knowing about, and knowing why*. He argues that these ways of knowing are all essential for understanding and appreciating works of art, but the first two, *knowing of or within* and *knowing how*, define the essence of aesthetic experience (Reimer 1992, pp.30-31). These two ways of knowing emerged as particularly important amongst the young adult audiences where there were significant numbers of members of the theatre industry involved. In the *TheatreSpace* research it was evident that *knowing within* related to the links made between the human questions raised in the world of the drama and the questions these raise in the minds of the young people about their own world or their participation in it.

There was this line, I cannot remember it to save myself, but it was something about like a girl in the shape of a monster, and the monster in the shape of a girl. And so then she was doing this silhouette, like she sort of, you know, she just sort of looks like a young girl, but when she did this silhouette, in particular in made her look like a monster and it was just like talking about, I don't know the darker side to things I guess and it was yeah. It had a very profound effect on everyone I think. Well I just think it really impacted on me the way she was talking about it, how she was like deep; into it talking about the issue and so forth I just felt strongly about that because I know what it's like to walk around and voice your opinion and be different characters and yeah. And yeah I took that to heart. (Female 15 years)

Whilst Reimer (1992, p.42) describes the other two aesthetic 'knowledges' as knowing about and knowing why as supplementary modes, these two forms of aesthetic knowing were also particularly relevant to the school students in the research, where *knowing about* theatre and

understanding why particular aesthetic choices were made were crucial elements in their responses to plays as audiences.

Theatre Literacy in the *TheatreSpace* Project

Mastery of the secondary discourses of theatre was a significant factor in the level of engagement in theatre performance for many of the school, university and young adult participants in the research. This finding is consistent with surveys and research conducted at a national level in the arts, which consistently find that experience of the arts leads to further engagement (Positive Solutions 2003, Australia Council 2010), and research that “..exposure to performance and an arts education increases interest and confidence in theatre going.” (Scollen 2007 p.7). It was significant that many of the young people who were both studying theatre and were theatre-makers themselves, in the classroom and outside school, demonstrated sophisticated theatre literacy in their responses to interview questions suggesting that theatre making can have an important impact on critical literacy.

Almost all of the teachers interviewed in the *TheatreSpace* research acknowledged the existence of theatre literacy and insisted on its essential importance in the learning of their students – in enabling them to move from language centred on personal pleasure and experience, to the mastery of a theatre discourse that described, identified analysed and comprehended the field.

However, a number of interviews involving both cohorts also indicated that the impact of theatre literacy can be complex and varied, and can distance young people from a performance as well as engage them. Some participants in the research identified the problem of always making a critical appraisal of the theatre they attended rather than having a critically engaged response to it.

I think it's actually impossible when you've studied to actually not... because it's, it's not just about taking the experience in as a consumer, you're actually part of the industry and you, I think you can't help and to your detriment you can't help but go with a critical mind (Male, early 20s)

Conversely, for a number of students attending their first live theatre there was a genuine sense of enjoyment and engagement, and there was evidence in many of the case studies that young people with limited or no experience of theatre were able to enjoy a performance in a direct and uncomplicated way.

It was an experience to go see live theatre because we haven't done much of that yet. I think it was a good experience. I thought it was good. I liked it. (Male 15 years)

A number of key informants in the research including theatre directors and education managers reinforced this aspect, of pleasure and experience, arguing that having knowledge of the language of theatre was not an essential requirement for theatre enjoyment.

If young people are learning about the craft in and of itself they will have more knowledge and may therefore be able to analyse it more deeply than those who don't. Those with less experience may have

a really positive experience but not be able to articulate it as well.
(Education Manager, June, 2011).

In contrast to this evidence of spontaneous engagement with theatre, there is a perception, scaffolded by research, that a lack of any prior theatre experience or curriculum study of drama can translate into alienating audience experiences, especially for school students (Cahill and Smith 2002). Some less experienced participants did comment that they felt their more experienced peers were gleaned more from the performance. Others went further, describing themselves as outsiders.

Theatre Literacy in Students

A number of respondents to the surveys and interviews in all three states were senior school students of Drama or English, and a significant majority of interviewees believed that having some formal knowledge of theatre contributed to their understanding and enjoyment of a play. Many respondents believed that knowing the play, and in many cases having studied it, was a major advantage in terms of their responses to performance.

When you see a play... if your parents and other people outside of drama don't really know the definition of non-naturalistic it's really hard to explain what it was like because it's so difficult - - yeah really I don't know, original and there were so many original ideas in Moth and it was hard to explain to other people who didn't see it. (Female 16 years)

This theatre confidence was not always accompanied by critical theatre literacy – as well as a mastery of the discourse of theatre. However, a number of students across the case studies clearly demonstrated the impact of schooling on theatre literacy. For example, students involved in programs of drama excellence in some schools in Queensland attend up to 10 performances a year in Years 11 and 12, and these students when interviewed presented as very knowledgeable about theatre and its elements. In Reimer's (1992) terms of *knowing how* and *knowing about* theatre, they were able to talk about performance styles and the stagecraft usage of sets, props and costumes as an integral part of their analysis of a play and its impact on them.

Young adults who were studying theatre at university were equally articulate about the elements of theatre performance. They also consistently identified an understanding of the human questions raised in plays, and made the connections with their own world and their participation in it, evidence of Reimer's (1992) *knowing within*.

I value theatre as a reflection of life. It's sort of a self-referential insight, it's, I think it's one of those powerful mediums that we have that's a way of understanding, and a way of communication, sort of a way of interacting, it's just, it's got a life about it. (Male 19 years)

Other students who presented as particularly literate identified the acquisition of the discourse of theatre as a combination of their earlier experiences of going to theatre with their family and the later, formal learning about theatre at school.

To me it's always been such a part of my growing up. We've always gone to the theatre and plays and musicals and concerts and all that sort of thing. (Female early 20s)

Some English teachers were able to identify in their students the same development of meta knowledge – mastery of two different discourses, that Gee (1989) and Lankshear (1994) perceived as essential to powerful critical literacy. In these cases the student brought their understanding from the discourse of their English learning to their reception of theatre.

I think the background they're coming from is that in English we teach them to be very critical learners so when they're looking at film or novels or anything like that they're looking at it in terms of its structures and the techniques that they've used and that's where they're coming from, that perspective so they've been able to transfer that to the theatre which is quite impressive. (English teacher)

However, for some older students, the formal learning at school that encouraged them to be both analytical and critical in their responses meant that they were sometimes distanced from a performance because they were busy evaluating and deconstructing it. As a result, they felt that they were less able to respond to plays just as entertainment, and were inhibited in engaging with the performance, yet believed that their access to the discourses of theatre increased their understanding, and their desire to attend.

It makes you want to see more theatre but then when you go and see it, it's a positive and a negative as you enjoy it, because you have the theatre background And you're criticising it and analysing it, which can sometimes make it less enjoyable, but usually it's very good. (Female, 16 years)

As the education officer of one of the theatre companies observed:

"If you are literate in any form then you'll have a different appreciation of it. However, sometimes to be literate doesn't necessarily allow you to have that wonderful free moment of transportation because you are analysing too deeply."

The Role of Teachers in Theatre Literacy

The potential role of teachers in preparing students for their encounters with theatre, to stimulate theatre literacy, was also clearly indicated in the contrasting experiences of a number of students. These students from a senior secondary college described the extent of their preparation

We were given a sheet.

Yeah we have a sheet, but not a lot of people followed the sheet because it wasn't really like um. Some of the questions were like, it was kind of hard to answer them, but um, yeah no.

Some of them were irrelevant to the play, because it was just written for every review that we had to do. (Gender/age?)

On the other hand, teachers who actively encouraged students to both study and perform the plays they were going to see were able to stimulate the combination of acquisition and learning that Gee (1989) argues leads to powerful literacy. For some students, it is the challenge of understanding how to make effective theatre themselves.

...when we were doing our play, we were like trying to work out how can we make this scene look good, how can we make it effective? And then seeing it you think oh, that is such a good way to do it like why didn't we think about that? Because it was so simple but effective at the same time and we were trying to be like trying to do all these little things, trying to make it look really good, trying to be difficult and it's like something so simple can look so effective. (Female 17 years)

For other students, intense engagement is related to the acquisition of meta-knowledge, where the learning about theatre intersects with their learning about life, as discussed earlier in this paper.

For some teachers, stimulating the development of theatre literacy in their students is obviously of crucial importance in their teaching. In some cases, especially in Queensland, teachers took their senior school students to see up to 10 plays a year in order to stimulate their love of theatre and the development of their theatre literacy. Even where many of the school groups that participated in the research in all three states were attending performances because study of the play was a compulsory requirement of their studies, their teachers were concerned to encourage deeper understanding and engagement with theatre and with the particular works experienced. One teacher described this process in her classroom.

Seeing something, it's wonderful afterwards to come to class and to talk about what they loved about the show and what they ah, found inspiring. What they thought powerful, what they thought really worked and then to reflect on. And then to have that conversation go to, you know, how that could inspire you with what you're doing with your play. Um. And then they start to think about that. And also, I suppose, I think they are always surprised at how much the actors or the directors or the company has made the play their own and not sort of just been restricted by the text. Um. That they've been able to fill out the text. So that's always been what has influenced them here. (Drama teacher, Senior Secondary College).

Does Theatre Literacy Transcend Individual, Gender and Social Differences?

An interesting and unexpected finding regarding theatre literacy in the case study of *The Importance of Being Ernest* was the number of striking similarities between the responses of 2 classes of Year 10 – 12 boys from a private school and the responses from the mainly female students in 3 classes of Year 10 – 12 students from an outer suburban high school.

These two very different groups of students were all members of drama excellence programs and regular theatre-goers with their schools. They were remarkably alike in their use of technical theatre language, their use of the language of experience and pleasure, and their ability to make comparisons with other live performances. Furthermore, all of them were active participants in theatre-making and related their experiences as audiences directly to their theatre work.

In complete contrast were the responses to the play from classes of Year 9 students from both schools, regardless of gender, who had also attended the same performance. Most of these younger students had never attended theatre before. The majority of them found the play difficult to understand, and were unable to identify or discuss different aspects or elements of the performance or the text. Most of their positive responses related to what was funny in the performance.

The evidence from this case study in particular reinforces the findings from the *TheatreSpace* data that ongoing experience of theatre and the building of theatre literacy within schools, regardless of gender and socio-economic demographic is a significant component in young people's responses to theatre. This is confirmed by Scollen (2007, p. 3) who notes that the extensive audience reception research conducted by William Sauter in the 1980s discovered that there was very little difference in experiences of theatre between women and men when the audiences were theatre literate.

Theatre Literacy in Young Adult Theatre Makers and Theatre Goers

The audience reception research conducted by Sauter referred to earlier found that young people aged in their early 20s experienced theatrical performance quite differently from older audience members (Scollen 2007, p.3). The *Theatre Space* research indicates that there are also significant differences between young adults themselves in their reception of theatre performance related to their levels of theatre literacy. Nevertheless, the majority of young adults in the case studies who were identified as theatre literate using Gee's (1989) definition had achieved mastery of their field through a combination of formal education, theatre attendance and adult acquisition of knowledge and skills. They demonstrated the ability to go beneath the surface in decoding performance using the language of theatre, and in engaging with theatre in complex ways that reflected Reimer's (1992) categories of aesthetic knowing.

In some cases, meta-knowledge about theatre was central to the experience for some young adults.

I would say that the reason I saw it was because I am interested in the work that Arena are doing and I'd also heard about the director and about things like Black SwanI would probably say that the most interesting aspects for

me were the idea for reinventing or re-imagining Melbourne history and its performance history. (Female adult)

In one particular case study, the young adults who attended the 2010 *World Theatre Festival* at the Brisbane Powerhouse provided a striking example of powerful theatre literacy in operation. A significant number of them were theatre workers, many of them interns at various theatres, whilst 31.5% of the survey respondents overall were university students. The majority of the interviewees were committed to seeing as much theatre as possible, and 54.5% indicated on the surveys that they had attended more than four theatre performances in the past year. Interestingly, 68.5% were attending the *World Theatre Festival* as a result of their wider interest in theatre rather than because of a particular performance. It was therefore not surprising that a significant number of the interviewees believed that attending theatre gives guidance to their work practice and career choices.

Some of these young adults were extraordinarily articulate when discussing the uniqueness of theatre.

I think the immediacy of it, being here and now, and also the fact that it's organic and that it can change and it's defined by rules but they can be broken. (Young adult theatre worker Gender/age?)

By contrast other case study data indicates that young adults with less theatre literacy engaged more directly with the context of being an audience, rather than with the meaning or theatricality of the play.

There were some slow moments, not at the beginning but sort of maybe after twenty minutes into the play or so where I felt that there was a bit of repetition and not much happening. So in those moments I lost a bit of excitement and also towards the end there was a scene, maybe two scenes from the very end that I found really dragging and I became really discouraged (Female mid 20s).

Closer analysis of the data, however, reveals that some young people with little exposure to theatre do not necessarily respond only to the visceral experience of being an audience member. In a number of cases, lacking the discourse to deconstruct their reactions, many young adults framed their responses in terms of their expectations of the play as a reflection of life.

..Whenever [the actors] had to speak, there was just no realism to it, there was like no heart in it. (Male, early 20s)

Conclusion

The understanding of theatre literacy that emerged from the *TheatreSpace* research has clear implications for teachers in schools and for the industry. First of all, it emerged that young people need both experience of theatre (acquisition) and learning about theatre and other fields of experience (meta-knowledge) in order to fully engage in meaningful discourse with

theatre and about theatre. It would appear that these forms of meaningful secondary discourse for many young people equate closely to Reimer's (1992) 4 ways of aesthetic knowing and involve an engagement with live performance that generates a deep understanding about theatre itself and about humanity.

While some theatre literate school students and even young adults struggled to reconcile their commitment to theatre with their need to analyse and deconstruct individual performance, for others mastery of the discourse of theatre has actually had a transformational effect on their experience of life. For them, powerful theatre literacy is a reality.

Other evidence from the *TheatreSpace* data challenges commonly-held assumptions about the elite nature of theatre and its appeal to females rather than males. The research clearly demonstrated that providing extensive experience of theatre for school students, and the consequent development of theatre literacy, is a significant component in young people's responses to theatre, regardless of their gender or socio-economic background.

Finally, an intensive involvement and engagement by groups of school students and individual young adults in theatre was crucial to their learning about theatre and their attendance as audiences. For some of the research participants, their engagement with, and mastery of the discourse of theatre, had a significant impact on their career and life choices, and on their understanding about themselves and the world they live in.

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