

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS



### What's new?\*

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#### ABSTRACT

In this keynote, Matt Edgerton, Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre company considers the old and the new, in terms of the work of contemporary theatre-making for young people. He discusses past and future projects undertaken by Barking Gecko and explains how much inspiration is drawn from traditional texts, as well as new and exciting examples of quality literature for children and young people.

#### KEYWORDS

Young People's Theatre (YPT); theatre-making; artistic director

Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here at my second DramaWest conference and in the room with so many phenomenal theatre artists, educators and thinkers.

And it is wonderful to be back here at the Brass Monkey, an iconic Perth venue. I first came here in the late nineties. At that time this strip was the centre of Perth's nightlife, the red light district, the restaurant district and also the place for angry young men to come to punch one another.

And in the heart of that strip was this pub: It was a *joint* – somewhere you could get good priced jugs of beer, play a game of pool, make friends and sit in the sun in the beer garden. I loved it – couldn't get enough. You'll understand the power of my admiration when I tell you that to get through drama school I worked around the corner at the Aberdeen Hotel as a glassy. At the time the Aberdeen Hotel was the home of bikies dealing drugs and the world's worst cover bands ... but with the rule 'no black jeans' to keep the place classy. So you can't blame me having a crush on the Brass Monkey. It felt like kind of the best joint in the neighbourhood.

These days the neighbourhood's changed – small bars popping up everywhere with immaculately designed decor and boutique Japanese whiskies: a 'cultural precinct', complete with state-of-the-art theatres. I hear that there's even a multi award winning children's theatre company that's moved in a few doors down. Everything is new, new, new.

But if you want a jug of beer, a game of pool and a sunny rooftop beer garden to while away the afternoon, this is still the place to come. Tradition and innovation. Old and new rubbing up alongside each other.

I've been asked to respond to the topic 'New Ground Rising' as it relates to Barking Gecko and the direction we are taking. I've chosen the somewhat jaunty title 'What's new?': a chance to literally tell you some of the new things we're doing, but also to examine the notion of

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\*A keynote presented at 'New Ground Rising', the Drama Australia Conference, Perth, 10 – 12 February, 2017.

newness itself. What is it we mean when we talk about the 'new' in the theatre as opposed to the old, the traditional and the familiar? What is behind our obsession with innovation? And is there any case for older ideas that have perhaps come to the party wearing a frock from another season, or another century?

But let's begin with the new. I've been working at Banksia Hill Juvenile Justice centre on a headphone verbatim project over the last couple of months. And one of the poems we've been exploring has been Roger McGough's (1967) *Let Me Die A Youngman's Death*. A bit of a bleak title, but McGough's theme is not actually about a desire to die, but rather a desire to live fully.

[Roger McGough's poem *Let Me Die A Youngman's Death* performed here]

It's a great poem. And for me, it captures the full-throated, hot blooded desire for the new. It embodies something of that restless artistic spirit that drives artists to live for the moment, to squeeze every drop of juice out of life's bitter lemon, to disregard caution and live immersed in the bodily fluids and liquids of life: constantly innovating, with the restless spirit of life itself.

It makes me think of Miranda in *The Tempest* (a character whose very name means wondrous or to wonder), declaring *O brave new world!*

To me the spirit of the new is a vital part of what drives us as theatre artists. Let's consider Treplev, the young playwright from Chekhov's (1895) masterpiece *The Seagull*. Treplev is perhaps the poster-boy for theatrical rebellion and the need for formal innovation. Like many of us he is sick of the stale, traditional theatre and wants something entirely new.

TREPLEV: As far as I'm concerned the modern theatre's in a blind alley, a fenced-off blind alley. When the curtain goes up and those great geniuses, those priests of sacred art, artificially lit, in a room with three walls, reproduce the way people eat, drink, love, move about and put their jackets on; when they try to concoct some moral out of their crass scenes and dreary lines – some petty, over-simplified moral, some one-size-fits-all moral for handy domestic use; when I'm offered a thousand varieties of the same thing, over and over and over again – then I run for it, run away, like Maupassant ran away from the Eiffel Tower, because it's crass vulgarity was pulverising his brain. New forms. We need new forms and if they're none to be had, we'd be better off with nothing at all.

The old and the new rubbing up against one another have been almost a defining characteristic of my journey so far in the theatre. The questions keep coming up: What do we hang onto? What do we throw out?

Working for a theatre company specialising in Shakespeare confronts you with these decisions on a daily basis. After graduating from WAAPA in 1999 I spent many years acting, directing, writing and teaching for Bell Shakespeare. The principle of a company built on 400-year-old writing, is that these old plays are 'quite good'. The director Declan Donnellan describes a loyalty to these plays not because they're old, but because 'they're the best possible scripts we can lay our hands on'.

John Bell would always rail against 'museum theatre'. The enemy, in his opinion, was the approach to classical theatre whereby a contemporary performance was simply an echo of a bold creative statement made many years ago. No, for a classic play to live today we were to treat it as if it had arrived in the mailbox this morning, fresh and new and never seen before. We put it on because it was a great piece of writing, but *how* we did it – that was

entirely up to us. As Peter Brook says 'Each line in Shakespeare is an atom. The energy that can be released is infinite – if we can split it open.' Old texts, new perspectives.

At times the results were sublime – performing Wingarra 'The Dream' on the AFL oval in Tennant Creek with a mixture of Shakespearean English, the local language Warramungu, and Aboriginal English was a theatrical triumph. The entire community was involved, including the bush tucker man and the police force, combining the old (Shakespeare), the very old (Warramungu) and the new (all of us) to make something much more than each element.

And so on to Barking Gecko, a company with an extraordinary thirty-year history of serving the families of this state. I've moved back here from Sydney a year and a half ago to become the company's fourth Artistic Director. In the last 18 months I've been in constant conversation with my partner at the company, our Executive Producer/CEO Helen Hristofski. We are constantly asking: What is central to this company's DNA? What do we hang onto and what can change?

Well the company has already evolved into a new animal more than once, letting go of a great many things. Time was that Barking Gecko was focussed on theatre in education, with plays in school gyms about road safety or bullying. That's fallen away, in favour of bringing children to the theatre and making work that asks questions rather than answers them. Barking Gecko founded and subsequently separated from Yirra Yaakin, Western Australia's Aboriginal theatre company. The company has also spawned a festival, which now also runs separately: the Awesome Festival. And recently, under my watch, we've moved from our home in a park in Subiaco to The State Theatre Centre, a powerful statement about the importance of art in the lives of children in W.A.

But the company has also hung onto what is crucial. We are proudly WA based and committed to making work that serves this city and the state. We are still child-centred in our work – everything we do from the way we develop work to the way we set up our foyers is based on the perspective of the child.

How we resolve questions about form and content, new and old, is in part mediated through our vision statement. This is a hard-won combination of words that Helen and I crafted last year.

Inspiring audiences of all ages to embrace a creative life, full of curiosity, empathy and play.

Our vision is a call to action. We are not satisfied with passivity in our audience, we want transformation. My Churchill Fellowship a few years ago into theatre for development taught me that for any kind of social change, it's important that a community feels like they are part of the art. So we are committed to creating a community not of passive customers but active creators.

So: *inspiring audiences of all ages to embrace a creative life*. And our three adjectives, our daily touchstones – *curiosity, empathy and play*.

The great music arts educator Eric Booth (2009) writes that 80% of what you teach is who you are. If you're a theatre educator then most of what your students learn about the theatre is by osmosis, through who you are in the room. So we try to embody these qualities in everything we do.

## Our first touchstone: curiosity

On my first day of drama school at WAAPA, Rhys McConnochie, our head of theatre, gave us a piece of advice that has stayed with me: 'All acting is about self-discovery'. It didn't matter

if you were playing a junkie or the Prince of Denmark, you had to be curious and find that place within yourself that could access those qualities. What I loved was the way he talked about this – as a muscle to be trained. If as an actor you can be curious, fascinated about the smallest details, the things that pass by ordinary humans, then you will *be* fascinating to watch.

This is an old idea that is all about the now. A sense of presence and curiosity in the work. So this curiosity is built into the fabric of how we work on shows and how we run Gecko Ensembles. It is in our DNA. It is lived and practised.

All of our young acting classes, what we call our Gecko Ensembles, are built on big questions. In our teacher training we stress that the difference between a good class and a great class is all in the quality of questions you ask. We want open, exciting, provocative questions that demand a response.

These last weeks I've been using a lot of the late great Augusto Boal's techniques at Banksia Hill Juvenile Justice Centre. Boal was the modern master of deep audience engagement and I've been using his exercises to pose questions to these incarcerated children. In one exercise, which became part of our headphone verbatim performance, we asked what they would do if they had the power to change the world. Here's one answer:

If I could do anything at all in life it would be to revert the entire human species to the way they should be. And they should return to the natural order when we lived in caves and cubbies and hunted animals to survive. Everyone worked together and there was no such thing as a hierarchy system or a government. We would be like wild animals you see today, living in packs and embracing the natural circle of life without modern day society's struggles.

Utopian thinking from a kid our society has all but given up on. Something that became part of a performance, articulated publicly, memorably and powerfully.

Curiosity also manifests in the time we take to interrogate our work and the quality of our decision-making. We're adapting a beautiful novel about a first-generation Chinese-Australian girl into a play – it's a kick arse ghost-fighting story with three lead female characters.

I'm co-directing the work with Felix Ching Ching Ho, a director born in Hong Kong and now based in Melbourne. She and I have had many meetings and sat through numerous theatre shows together just to get a sense of each other as artists. We've also had two creative developments: the first in Melbourne – a script and dramaturgical development; the second in China – cultural research and meeting artists.

In April and August we're bringing a group of actors in to Perth to test our next draft. Some of the elements we'll be exploring in our next stage include ancient Chinese martial art forms, digital projection mapping, Chinese ink- and water-painting and contemporary Chinese electronic music.

So this is something new in our direction as a company. A keen curiosity about form, coupled with a patience about the work that allows for thoughts to grow and gestate.

Most theatre companies are having shorter and shorter rehearsal times in order to save money. Of course this is a false economy, because the work is not what it could be, it disappears and artists are out of work again. We want to make work that has the opportunity to tour for years.

Last year I worked as the dramaturg on our Helpmann Award winning production of *Bambert's Book of Lost Stories*. The production was directed by Luke Kerridge and had an eight-year time gap between his first conception and our production. This year it's going to

Kent, to Edinburgh, to various locations in the Eastern States as well as back here in Perth and, we hope, to Germany. We have more national and international offers for touring in subsequent years. In this case, the outcome was worth the investment of curiosity and time. The late author of *Bambert's Book of Lost Stories*, Reinhart Jung (2010) offers some good advice here: 'It is a matter of demanding, for the smallest, only the finest'.

Finally, curiosity leads us to push into entirely new areas that we've never been before. In November this year we have a world premiere of a new play called *My Robot*. We're partnering with SciTech and UWA to develop the technology to make this happen.

The idea for the show came out of lots of 'I wonder' conversations with Helen and myself over a number of months asking how we might use new technology to explore the changing world that children are growing up into.

To our knowledge it will be the first play in the state with a functioning onstage robot. The irony is that most robot stories are built on ancient archetypes, whether a Pinocchio as source for the film *WALL-E*, Gnosticism as a source for the television series *Westworld* or Bluebeard inspiring the film *Ex Machina*. A curious mindset reappropriates the old myth for a modern audience.

## Our second touchstone: empathy

Theatre has rightly been described as an 'empathy gym'.

Developing empathy is at the heart of our mainstage work, taking young people into entirely new worlds with each show we create, whether into the life of an old man in an attic in Germany; the lives of teenager on a riverbank in remote Australia or a young Australian-Chinese girl returning to her ancestral home and reconnecting with her cultural heritage. Through identifying with people who are simultaneously like and unlike themselves, young people expand their circle of empathy.

And empathy is also a central focus of our Gecko Ensembles – our weekly drama classes for young people of all ages. We are planting these year-round empathy-outposts round the city and the state. We have four in Perth (UWA, Subiaco, Kwinana and Kalamunda), Broome in the regions, and two more towns hopefully coming online in the next term or so. And we're also taking theatre work out there. In 2016 we toured *In A Dark Dark Wood* to outer metro Perth, and all around regional WA. It was pretty wonderful to end the tour in Broome with hundreds of smiling children who saw a Barking Gecko production for the first time and many of whom are planning to join us this year at our Broome Gecko Ensemble.

This term our theme across all of our Gecko Ensembles is *The Tourists*, based on the UNESCO international year of sustainable tourism for development. A bit of a mouthful, but a great theme when you think about it. Australians are some of the world's most prolific tourists. In the words of one of our de facto anthems, *I Still Call Australia Home*, we are 'always travelling' and 'love being free'. So UNESCO's theme raises a lot of big questions for children growing up here: What is a country, a national identity, a home?

Which humans are allowed to travel beyond their own national borders and why?

This term, one of our key inspirations for these questions will be an exquisite children's book by Constance Ørbeck-Nilssen and Akin Duzakin (2016). It's called *Why Am I Here?* The quality of questions in this book, coupled with its exquisite artwork, make it a powerful inspiration for drama. Our Honorary Scholar Robyn Ewing has spent a lifetime articulating

the power of high quality literature in the lives of children, and this philosophy is exemplified here on every page in word and image.

The book goes beyond simple questions about tourism and travel to explore deeper ideas about the nature of the self. A child in a canoe travels through imagined countries, asking seemingly simple questions, inviting empathy and self-reflection: What if I lived where there was only desert? What if there were a war where I lived? Why am I me and not someone else? Why am I here?

### So onto our final aspect of our vision statement: play

My favourite moment during this last year of Barking Gecko was during a performance of *In A Dark Dark Wood* when a six year old girl sitting in front of me turned to her friend and said, with a massive grin, 'I am so scared right now!'

That beautiful mixture of delight and terror, distilled for me in an instant why I love my job. It's often said that the theatre is a safe place to explore dangerous ideas. But what is sometimes forgotten in that neat equation, is just how much fun this can be. Something that this girl understood in every part of her being.

Playfulness is an aspect of theatre that is very old, as old as human history. The playfulness of storytelling is why we listen.

In our Gecko Ensembles Teacher Training we call this 'the pleasure principle' or sometimes 'engagement before content'. If young people are laughing they are open to powerful and memorable learning.

This is the principle that infuses our Living Lecture Series on Shakespeare that we take around to perform in school theatres. It may sound like an oxymoron, but these are *playful lectures*. Last year we began with *Macbeth* and this year we'll be playing with *Romeo And Juliet* in early May. These are old texts and we don't shy away from deep analysis, but our approach is infused with all the playfulness and invention our four contemporary actors can muster. It's a kind of purposeful fun that allows learning and artistic discovery to happen.

So these are a few principles that help us make decisions at Barking Gecko. Our work is a call to action, to *embrace a creative life*. And we are living, breathing and creating based on the principles of *curiosity, empathy and play*. These ideas help us decide what to let go of and what to fight for. They help us make work that is new but has deep roots.

There is no getting around the fact that the fundamentals of what we do in the theatre are ancient. Humans have always gathered in rooms or caves or town squares to tell stories, to listen and connect to one another; breathing the same air and being moved by the artful choreography of the human voice and the human body. At its very best, theatre is a combination of innovation and deep wisdom, of passionate impulse and patience.

Even Treplev, the great radical figure in *The Seagull* revises his singular desire to burn the past by the conclusion of the play. He comes to the realisation that there is something deeper, more humane and profound going on in our transactions in the theatre than just the outward form of the work:

TREPLEV: The more I write, the more I think it's not a matter of old forms and new forms: what's important is to write without thinking about forms at all. Just write and pour out whatever's in your heart.

What Treplev and the actress Nina come to realise in this play is that in fact there is such a thing as *craft* in the arts. There are such things as *experts* and such a thing as *expertise* in

theatre; there are things each of us know that are worth hanging onto and worth repeating, refining and getting better at.

This idea of a balance between wonder and wisdom is better captured by a dramatic moment than by any description I could invent. I'd like to give some context to that moment of wondrous discovery from *The Tempest*, I mentioned earlier.

For those who might need a reminder, Miranda lives on a remote island and has only ever known two humans: her dad and a slave that tried to assault her. Earlier today she has come across the first new human that has ever visited the island. Within an hour or two she's fallen in love and married him. But *then* she sees a whole group of humans, of all different ages. The experience is euphoric, new and wonderful.

Regardless of how it's played, it is always a strangely funny moment in the theatre. This new bride, suddenly surrounded by a whole bunch of blokes:

MIRANDA Oh, wonder!How many goodly creatures are there here!How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,That has such people in 't!

Her father Prospero answers her in four words.

PROSPERO Tis new to thee.

A brilliant answer that once again reminds us what an economical genius Shakespeare could be when he wanted to.

Tis new to thee.

For all of us the creative tension we have in our lives as artists and arts educators is between Prospero and Miranda; between the wisdom of experience and the wonder of discovery; between knowledge and curiosity.

Thank you for listening to my somewhat rambling thoughts.

Please enjoy the conference. Well done to Sven and Jess and everyone who has put this together. The program looks sensational. It is great to get together as fellow workers in this field and examine what we do and why we do it.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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