

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by: TIM MULLOOLY - 2004 Churchill Fellow

To study the provision of theatre for children.

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1. Introduction.

Between 9 July and 7 November 2005, I traveled to countries in Europe and North and South America to 'study the provision of theatre for children' - exploring infrastructure and networks, searching for professional development opportunities, investigating form, history, contemporary developments and philosophies related to my sector of interest.

The trip comprised the two months of travel approved in my Fellowship itinerary and two months of self-funded travel. This report covers the full duration of the trip as my principal focus throughout was my Fellowship topic.

My final itinerary varied significantly from that which I originally tended with my Fellowship application. Two of my European proposals fell through due to circumstances beyond my control. Before my departure I received approval for a revised itinerary.

Generally I had some difficulty achieving my goals in Europe and was required to adjust my aims according to the situation as I found it. This tactic proved successful and I was able to make valuable contacts and achieved positive outcomes. In the Americas I had a wide range of fruitful experiences.

Overall, given the challenges I encountered, the flexibility of the Churchill Trust regarding my itinerary and my decision to extend my travel time, proffered a rich and complex Fellowship.

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2. Executive Summary.

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Project description:

‘To study the provision of theatre for children’ to:

- Forge relationships with overseas companies and artists.
- Strengthen my knowledge and skill
- Reflect that strength in my work with Kite and the Australian children’s theatre sector.

Fellowship highlights:

- Kilkenny Arts Festival - strong theatre.
- Festival Mondial des Arts (Montreal) - wide variety of theatre form and philosophy.
- ASSITEJ International World Congress (Montreal) - deep engagement with practitioners from around the globe, valuable discourse, networking for future collaborations.
- National Storytelling Festival (Jonesborough, Tennessee) - inspirational presenters, the pure essence of good theatre for children.
- Creative Arts Team (New York) - grass-roots community engagement, commitment to arts in education.
- Songholon Jata (New York) - remarkable story-cycle from Mali.
- Kiwi economist - ‘Externalities’

Lessons and conclusions:

- Cultural embeddedness, level of support and intellectual sophistication of approach in Europe and Nth America.
- Challenging Arts/Education discourse.
- The gap, in Australia, between level of sector sophistication and achievement and wider society’s grasp of value of sector contribution.
- Artistic and philosophical achievement of Kite.

Dissemination and Implementation:

- My input to the work and programming at Kite.
- Via Kite’s Partnership relationship with Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC).
- Representation at Industry Forums (e.g. The IDEA Festival, Brisbane 2006).
- Industry Journals (e.g. Lowdown, Ed Views)
- Continued dialogue and future collaborations with a number of organisations and individuals in Europe and North America.

3. Programme.

Perth

Grahame Gavin, Artistic Director, Barky Gecko

Italy July 9 - 22

Silvia Balossi (Rome)

Stephano Guizzi (Granara)

Germany July 23 - Aug 5

David and Hilary Erskine and friends (Berlin)

Netherlands Aug 6 - 12

Boulevard Festival (Den Bosch)

Ireland Aug 13 - 24

The Ark Centre for Children (Dublin)

Kilkenny Arts Festival

England Aug 25 - Sept 2

David Wright (London)

Canada Sept 3 - Oct 6

Festival Mondial des Arts (Montreal)

ASSITEJ International World Congress (Montreal)

USA Oct 7 - 21

National Storytelling Festival (Jonesborough, Tennessee)

Kennedy Centre (New York)

Creative Arts Team (New York)

Chile Oct 22 - 26

Pasmi (Santiago)

4. Report.

Introduction:

The performing arts sector in Australia and particularly the children's theatre sub-sector, has undergone a challenging and increasingly sophisticated evolution since the 1970s. The exploratory movements of popular theatre, community theatre, theatre-in-education and drama-in-schools have made significant contributions to an emerging liberalisation of Australians perceptions of culture, history, nationhood, education, inclusiveness and social equity and responsibility.

These movements at their outset in Australia were typically informed by developments in the practice and philosophies of the European and North American theatre experience. They have in turn made valuable contributions back to the global application of these practices and philosophies through international collaboration and discourse.

Over thirty years, Kite Theatre for Early Childhood has been making its own contribution to this evolution. The companies organisational, geographical and artistic circumstances have made manifest a unique response through its body of work. The nature of schools based work, sparse funding and the marginalisation/invisibility of the work in the broader profit-driven social context has meant that Kite's employees have generally had to engage in these developments in an, all be it dynamic but somewhat, isolated atmosphere. Our experiences of best-practice have been through professional journals and limited contact at national festivals and forums, primarily as they occurred in Queensland

The aim of my Fellowship was to begin to address this isolation through a practical program of networking, discourse and professional interaction in Europe and North America. From the outset I encountered unforeseen challenges. However I have learnt flexibility and improvisation at Kite and applied these principles to approach the challenges.

Europe:

My Fellowship application expressed a desire to attend an international seminar of Artistic Directors in Hanover. Despite having been awarded the Fellowship, YPAA (Youth Performing Arts Australia), the peak body responsible for nominating an Australian candidate for the seminar, decided for their own reasons to support another (and very worthy) candidate. I was aware of this condition when I included the activity in my application. I had anticipated that the seminar would provide me with a broad base for networking in Europe.

In the process of rearranging my itinerary I became aware of a fundamental seasonal characteristic of the northern-hemisphere professional arts calendar. That is, during the long mid-year summer season most professional children's theatre companies in Europe close down for the duration or work in semi-isolation on a holiday touring circuit. This made it very difficult to secure the kind of concentrated exposure I had hoped for.

Consequentially I adjusted my aims away from skills development towards the notion of making fruitful contacts for future collaborations.

In this context I went to Italy (Rome, Bologna and Granara), Berlin and London where I met performing artists, arts administrators and educationalists. In Nederland (Den Bosch) and Ireland (Kilkenny) I attended performing arts festivals and talked with practitioners from participating companies about their craft, their visions and their challenges.

In Bologna, a chance meeting with a visiting Economist from New Zealand introduced me to the economic concept of 'Externalities', which can help to measure in empirical terms, the true cost/return of theatre for young people in the light of the far-reaching social outcomes of the activity.

Canada:

In Montreal (September 20 - 30) I attended the ASSITEJ International World Congress and the Festival Mondial des Arts.

ASSITEJ is the world peak-body representing Theatre for Young People. The Congress is convened every three years in a different member country to discuss current issues, report on activities around the globe and decide on future initiatives. By the standards of the Montreal Convention Centre it is a small and congenial gathering that sparks lively debate and ongoing collaboration.

The Festival Mondial des Arts is a biennial performing arts festival for children that dedicated its 2005 program to the theme of the 'Americas' and presented it in tandem with the Congress.

Whilst generally the Festival/Congress program seemed to be uneven and lacking in cohesion my time in Montreal was stimulating and valuable. I went to fifteen Festival performances in the company of established and emerging practitioners from six continents and found wonderful opportunities to consider what are the key ingredients for good theatre for children.

In terms of concrete outcomes for the future, Montreal was a tremendously valuable experience. I was able to make a network of contacts with key players in a collaborative project we have been exploring between Kite, Brisbane's Kooemba Jadara Indigenous Theatre Company and Canadian and USA indigenous arts organisations and communities.

USA:

My four days at the International Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee was inspirational and pure joy. A relentless program of storytelling by USA's top professional storytellers rekindled my belief in story as the essence of theatre for children. Storytelling is the source theatrical form, unencumbered with 'production value' that can so easily distract practitioners and audiences from the fundamental human need to make meaning and communicate.

These reflections were heightened and intensified in New York by *Songholon Jata*, a traditional story-cycle performed by members of the New York Mali community from the African American studies Department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. *Songholon Jata* is a ceremonial narration of an original Mandeng epic told in poetry, music and dance. It was a mesmerizing experience that touched the very nerve of my creative impulse. "In Africa the words and the deeds are one."

At the Lincoln Institute for the arts in education, I talked with Holly Fairbank Assistant Director of the Teacher Education Collaboration. The Lincoln Institute is a global leader in the documentation and study of trends, philosophies and forms of the arts in education. It has had a profound influence on the growing understanding and application of the power of arts in education. Holly briefed me about the Institute's latest programs and research and provided links and contacts for further exploration.

At the Public School 211 in the Bronx I met Helen Wheelock and Steve Elm from the Creative Arts Team (CAT) and observed their Early Learning Through the Arts: New York City Wolf Trap Program, an interactive drama and theatre program designed to explore social and curricular issues. I also traveled downtown and met Christopher Vine, Artistic Director of CAT. My conversation with Christopher revealed that CAT and Kite share an identical philosophy and dedication for theatre for kids. However we found that we use very different forms and this lead to a wonderful exchange of ideas for theatre and drama and for collaboration and community engagement.

Santiago (Chile):

I was thrilled when I learned that I could return to Australia via Santiago. In January 1999 Kite participated in Entepola Festival of Popular Theatre in Santiago and surrounding districts and developed a very close relationship with a Chilean company called Pasmí. Our relationship stems through Penny Glass, a remarkable community artist from Australia and now working with Pasmí. Kite and Pasmí have an ongoing collaborative creative-development relationship, which also includes Te Itibwerere Theatre for Development in the central Pacific Republic of Kiribati. The project is called 'Ship of Fools' and since its inception has fostered a series of potent cultural exchanges between the three communities.

I had four days with Pasmí invigorating our impossible fools dream to reach across the Pacific and share culture and creativity.

5. Conclusions.

The provision of theatre for children is a passionate, multi-faceted and powerfully active cultural pursuit. By its nature theatre for children is altruistic and I saw its practitioners responding to the demands and challenges of creativity and business with grass-roots inventiveness, diversity and co-operation.

I was particularly drawn to the work and philosophies of those projects, companies and individuals who most strongly embody a sense of ‘child-centricity’. Childhood is a time of wonder, belief and quantum learning. Theatre is a medium intrinsically relevant to this phase of life (and beyond) and can contribute to a socially and culturally inclusive community peopled by active, thoughtful, inventive and responsible individuals. The type of child-centric companies I am referring to are driven by these high ideals to create accessible, relevant and challenging theatre experiences for kids.

A specific issue that seems to be entering the debate throughout the sector is the whether the Arts in education is unduly restricted by curriculum. In Queensland, I have certainly sensed that ‘outcome’ based learning is influencing, restrictive thinking and planning by teachers and school organisation and, their ability to respond to ‘arts’ based pedagogy. One line of response that I found some people are taking throughout Europe and America is to withdraw from the education/school sector altogether.

Given the emphasis placed on learning in schools in developed countries, I personally think it would be expedient and unfair to take this response. Amongst all my discussions and observation of work during my Fellowship it was generally those individuals and companies primarily committed to children’s learning, and who continue to engage in and strive to influence the system rather than abandon kids to it, who in my opinion are making the most interesting and relevant theatre. I was impressed by this commitment and inspired by the creativity of those practitioners who in turn inspire the joy of creativity in children and their carers.

My observations and reflections during my trip and since my return to work have given me a broader perspective with which to gauge Kite’s work, philosophical approach and the challenges we face in our service delivery. I think that Kite produces a unique and valuable program of a very high theatrical standard while remaining relevant, accessible and appropriate.

I am inspired with a new vigor to continue to build Kite’s work and reputation and to showcase it and share it on a statewide, national and international stage.

6. Recommendations.

The influence of my Fellowship on the provision of theatre for children will primarily be reflected in my core creative work with Kite. Our current Partnership relationship with the Queensland Performing Arts Centre will provide a medium for our work to have a wider national and international influence. Both organisations have national recognition and respect, for their dedication to best practice in theatre for children. Together through collaboration, QPAC's Out of the Box Festival for Early Childhood (now recognised internationally) and through industry forums, journals and discourse our Partnership will continue to influence this practice throughout Australia.

In 2006 Kite will present a forum on Theatre for Children at the IDEAS Festival in Brisbane, develop a long-term project with Indigenous arts workers and the communities of the Torres Strait and present work at Out of the Box Festival for Early Childhood. In 2008 we will participate in, and showcase work at, the 16th ASSITEJ World Congress and Festival in Adelaide.

Recognition, support and funding are issues that Kite will continue to address through representation and showcase of best practice.