

## **Australian Women Directors Alliance 'Creating Change' Forum,**

The 'Creating Change' Forum was held at the Arts Centre over the two days of 10th and 11th September, 2010. It was convened by Melanie Beddie, Lucy Freeman, Petra Kalive and Jane Woollard and was supported by The Office of Women's Policy and the Arts Centre. The Forum was attended by over 100 delegates from around Australia. 97% of these delegates were female theatre directors and theatre makers working professionally as well as in areas of teaching and research and administration. The AWDA 'Creating Change' Forum presented a model for thinking about social change in a dynamic and energetic way. Women directors claimed their legacy, their role as leaders in the theatre profession, and their commitment to supporting one another as we work towards greater diversity in our profession.

The key issues that brought about the need for the Forum are: The ongoing question about the visibility of women theatre directors; The desire to acknowledge and celebrate the existing body of work of women directors and the energy and vision of the diverse artists gathered at the forum; To facilitate a discussion to craft a series of future actions and allow an opportunity to envisage new theatres for the 21st century



Delegates were invited to reflect on the following statements and questions and to note their responses on the flip chart stands positioned around the room.

1:What am I here for?

2: What makes my heart sing?

3: In relation to my practice, what do I regret?

The forum began with a panel entitled **How does it happen?** chaired by Lucy Freeman. This panel was pitched to practitioners in their first decade of practice. The meetings of AWDA which occurred throughout 2010 had made us aware that these practitioners often have questions about how to approach MPAB companies. Panellists were John Paul Fischbach: Executive Director Auspicious Arts Incubator, Maryanne Lynch: Dramaturge in Residence, Malthouse Theatre; Vanessa Pigrum, Artistic Director, Full Tilt and the Arts Centre Program Manager, Creative Development; Aidan Fennessey, Associate Director, Melbourne Theatre Company.

The focus of the panel was to give an insight into how work is chosen and programmed in Melbourne's Major Performing Arts Companies. Panelists were invited to share their thoughts and observations about making a pitch to their particular organisation. The Forum continued with a gracious and hearty welcome from Judith Isherwood, CEO of the Arts Centre. A number of delegates later spoke about how important it was to be invited into the Arts Centre and be given support by them.

The second panel of the evening was **Three Director's Visions**, chaired by Melanie Beddie. The panelists were Kate Cherry, Artistic Director of Black Swan Theatre Company; Tanya Gerstle, Artistic Director of Optic Nerve and Anne-Louise Sarks, Co-Artistic Director of Hayloft.



Panelists were invited to reflect upon their artistic practice from its beginnings to the present moment. This session brought together three very different visions and aesthetics from directors who work in a variety of settings - the mainstream, the experimental and the independent. Each of them articulated very adroitly

their own vision and method within the context of the current theatre environment. This panel was very inspirational and set the tone for the Forum as a positive expression of the work of women theatre directors, their capacity to persevere, to speak articulately about their work, and to lead.

The first evening of the forum was rounded off with drinks and food. This informal gathering was an opportunity for delegates to network and share news and ideas for ongoing communication and support.



The second day of the forum began early with a panel entitled **Body of Work**, chaired by Professor Peta Tait. Panelists Kim Durban, Maude Davey and Donna Jackson spoke about their own ongoing practice and the people who had inspired them. They each spoke with humour and passion about the assumptions they had made early on in their practice and the realisations they have arrived at now in their third or fourth decade of work. The importance of this panel was to make real the existing history of women's theatre work in Australia. Ours is an industry which often focuses on the present and is too often forgetful of past achievements. This is doubly true for women artists and this panel was a timely and exciting reminder of the experience, skill and talent we already have in our working artists.

After a short break we continued with the fourth panel entitled **Creating Change**. This panel was chaired by Jane Woollard and brought together women from theatre and non-theatre backgrounds who are all leaders in the own fields and whose passion is creating change. This panel was designed to allow the delegates to reflect on their own industry/community from new perspectives. Panelists Sarah Houseman, Executive Officer for the Victorian Association for Environmental Education (VAEE), Elizabeth Bennett, a barrister, and Kristy Edmunds Artistic Director of the New York Armoury, explored the notion of change and how it takes place, why we resist it, and how we might think differently about change



How can movements for change, social diversity and community connectedness transform our industry and our working lives?

These women's thoughts and observations provoked exciting responses from the audience and very productive dialogues began.



The afternoon of the second day was devoted to the question **Where to now? Building a practical vision.** This session was facilitated by Rob Ryan. Rob met with eight group leaders, Marcia Ferguson, Liz Jones, Gorkem Aragalou, Penelope Bartlau, Jude Anderson, Naomi Edwards, Yvonne Virsik and Adena Jacobs, and outlined the process for the afternoon session.



Each group leader sat at a table and delegates joined them. Each delegate was asked to consider

*“What are the changes we would like to see which will improve our working lives beyond the Forum?”* Each delegate was asked to write down 8-10 ideas for a practical vision. The groups then selected the best 3 ideas from around the table which were then ‘published’ on flip charts for the consideration of all delegates. Then a shortlist of the best ten ideas to build a practical vision for change for women theatre directors was generated. Small groups further explored one each of the six most popular ideas. We investigated each idea with the following questions:

What are the component parts of this goal?  
What actions are needed?  
What do we do now to enable this idea?  
Actions: Who will do what and when?

**To lobby for the establishment of medium sized theatre companies in Australia** A lobby group to establish a medium sized company which has long term funding. Models discussed included: 3 independent companies to have the support of a manager and a publicist for 1-3

years; adopting an artistic directorship model that provides programming experience; finding partnerships or forming alliances with a 150seat theatre (the size of Napier Street) or 'flexible space'.

**Developing a resource hub** The need for a hub was identified to provide independent theatre makers administrative and production support to allow more energy for the creation of artistic work. The hub would have an orientation to independent theatre, with a focus on support for women as part of the mandate. The idea of a venture capital model was discussed in terms of the gaps that exist in marketing, the role of the creative producer/entrepreneur and material resources (such as rehearsal and performance space.) Ideally the Hub would be part of a virtual network.

**7 Shows by 7 Women Directors in Major Festivals in 4 years** To develop a rough set of 'rules' to begin and then in 2 ½ years, identified 7 pieces of outstanding work. Individual women create and fund their own work, with 'Fresh Directions' lobbying for State Arts Festivals to look at the projects. The group agreed to meet again in a fortnight to flesh out the idea. NB: This group has been active since the Forum, with one sub committee meeting and another meeting scheduled for late November.

**Mentorships and training across a career** Develop pathways to mentorship and fields of practice. TNV was suggested as a place for centralization and consolidation of opportunities. Possibility of approaching The Athenaeum Club and The Australian Council and Arts Vic for support. The need to lobby major arts funding to change the structure of mentorship was identified.

### **A Directors Network**

Workshops and professional development and spaces suitable for development of work. The need for a website to profile directors and list employment opportunities. Regular meetings, lobbying issues, developing a social networking model and utilizing the Internet more effectively. NB: At the most recent AWDA meeting it was decided that AWDA will continue as a lobbying and networking organization and that AWDA meetings and one-off events could be convened in response to need.



## **Conclusion**

The Forum concluded with a challenge from the four convenors for delegates and AWDA membership to take up the task of lobbying and driving actions for change. The convenors expressed their desire for others to take on a leadership role within the Alliance. The Forum tackled many subjects in a limited time frame. In hindsight, perhaps we attempted to cover too much ground. The task of identifying areas of practical change and further work for professional lobbying, sub-committees and leadership development was difficult to achieve in the last session on Saturday afternoon.

However, the response to the Forum was overwhelmingly positive. Many delegates spoke of feeling uplifted, empowered and described how they had discovered a new energy for their work. This can be attributed to the feeling of solidarity in the room – that delegates benefited from hearing other women directors speak about their practice, and that being in a room with other women directors made them feel supported. One delegate said she felt good about her work for the first time in a very long time. This could be attributed to the sense of failure many women directors might feel as they struggle to break into MPAB structures. Is it because I am not good enough? Not sexy enough? Not skilled enough? To feel affirmed in our practice was empowering and positive.

The acknowledgement of difference and diversity of practice, method and aesthetic was also a positive aspect of the exchange. Delegates were affirmed in their own unique practice, however, there was no intention to discover a female aesthetic working in contrast to the male norm. Our gender is not a problem in our art making, rather the professional challenges we face are related to professional development, employment opportunities and accountability to equal opportunity legislation in funded organisations.

The challenge for us all is to find new ways of working in a challenging profession, to propose new models rather than replicating the old, and to respectfully attend to the demise of old ways of thinking about leadership and art making. We are committed to being ready with strong arms and hearts to midwife the birth of energised, diverse and subversive theatres for the 21st century.

**‘Tell me what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?’  
Mary Oliver**

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