

Arena Theatre's Big Fish: The *Marlin* Project: Finding New Meanings in the Spaces Between Audience and Participation in Theatre for Young People



Christine Sinclair, Richard Sallis, Christian Leavesley, and Jolyon James

Abstract This chapter examines an exploration of the intersection between theatrical performance and theatrical experience by Arena Theatre Company, one of Australia's longest-running producers of theatre for young people. A case study sits at the centre of this chapter. It focuses on *Marlin*, a project where young people (ages 8–12) were invited to be both audience and active participants in two thematically linked experiences – a mainstage theatre production and an interactive theatrical event.

The chapter interrogates the ways in which Arena theatre seeks to forge new relationships with audience by the crafting of new forms, built upon the foundations of core drama-in-education/theatre-in-education principles made new in the hands of innovative, deeply reflective and reflexive young artists. The artistic aspirations of the company are contextualized by a discussion of questions which are compelling for contemporary theatre for young people companies – what is success and how is it measured; what is renewal and how is it crafted ethically and aesthetically?

Keywords Immersive theatre · Play · Performance · Young audiences · Theatrical form · Drama-in-education · Twilight role · Metaxis

Learning, the educational process, has long been associated only with the glum. Marshall McLuhan

C. Sinclair (✉) · R. Sallis
Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: cesi@unimelb.edu.au; sallis@unimelb.edu.au

C. Leavesley · J. James
Arena Theatre Company, Bendigo, VIC, Australia
e-mail: christian@arenatheatre.com.au; jolyon@arenatheatre.com.au

Arena Theatre Company (Arena) is one of Australia's leading producers of performance for young audiences (ages 5–25). Formed in 1966, its work is based around the central question of 'What is the role of performance for young people in today's world?' Its vision is founded on the belief that:

Theatre creates a space that is surprising, alive, fertile, explosive, dangerous and inspiring ... where contemporary human experience can be uniquely expressed, felt, celebrated and reinvented. It is a space to which everyone is entitled, on equal terms (Arena Theatre Company 2015a).

Arena has generated a body of cutting edge theatrical work, forging relationships with young people through a progression of innovative outreach programs in the nexus between performance and audience.

Recently the company has embarked on an artistic interrogation of contemporary intersections between theatrical *performance* and theatrical *experience*. In the *Marlin* project, young people (aged 8–12) had the opportunity to be both audience and active participants in two thematically linked experiences – a mainstage theatre production, *Marlin*, and a participatory and immersive narrative-driven theatrical experience, the *Expedition*, in which a small group of young people are taken out on a river boat in a theatrical simulation of a sea going adventure. With the two events scheduled in the same school holiday period, young people could choose to attend one or both of these theatre experiences; the performance and expedition could be taken in any order or independently of the other.

The immersive theatre event is by no means a new form within the theatre for young people artistic lexicon, and the work explored here resonates powerfully with its forebears from earlier eras, for example TIE (Jackson 1993; Jackson and Vine 2013), while also echoing the practices of Heathcote, Bolton, O'Neill and many others in evoking a visceral and tactile rendering of DIE (Drama in Education) or 'process drama'. However here the boat and the river in the expedition are real, the water is actually wet, the life jackets are mandatory. Yet the world created by Leavesley, James and their team is an act of collective and individual imaginations.

This chapter interrogates the ways in which this theatre for young people is forging new relationships with audience by the crafting of new forms, built upon the foundations of core drama-in-education/theatre-in-education principles made new in the hands of innovative, deeply reflective and reflexive young artists. The voices of Leavesley and James are woven through this account of their artistic work. Their reflections and insights were gathered through a sustained, reflective interview process and are included verbatim here, thus balancing the critical distance of the academic authors with the immediacy and visceral, embodied knowing of the artists who experienced the *Expedition* as creative practitioners.

1 About the Case Study

In a collaboration with the Graduate School of Education (MGSE) at the University of Melbourne, this mainstage and immersive theatre project, *Marlin*,¹ was the subject of an evaluation process, which now informs the writing of the case study at the heart of this chapter. The purpose of the evaluation was to explore the boundaries of performance and the experience for the young people in the audience. The company was particularly interested to learn more about how experiencing a story, as participant and story maker, could enhance and extend the audience encounter with a play in performance and vice versa.

Drawing on conventional evaluation methods such as survey and interview combined with arts-based responses including writing, drawing and video diaries, the evaluation team (Sinclair and Sallis from the University of Melbourne; Leavesley and James from Arena) built a three-dimensional picture of the range and qualities of meaning-making in which young people engaged with the *Marlin* project. In this chapter, the authors respond to the aesthetic richness of the *Marlin* project, while exploring in depth the development and 'production' of the immersive event, known as the *Expedition*. As authors, we take ourselves on an expedition which considers this work in the light of Arena Theatre's relationship with its audience, with its educative project, its commitment to artistic excellence and in recognition of its long heritage at the cutting edge of theatre for young people in Australia.

2 Context

Damien Millar's play, drawn from classic seafaring literature such as Ernest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1954) is described in company publicity as: 'A life and death fishing adventure played in a sea of foam, for ages 8+ and their grandparents' (Arena Theatre Company 2015b). Set in a game fishing² region in Northern Queensland, Australia, the play is both an adventure set at sea and a coming of age story. Its protagonist is Billy, a young girl whose father went fishing to catch a marlin 2 years earlier and never returned. Grieving over the loss of her father, Billy forms a special bond with her grandfather when they attempt to return to the open ocean a marlin that has been caught by a local fisherman. This pivotal incident in Millar's play, returning a marlin to the sea, becomes the central premise of the immersive event, the *Expedition*.

¹ That is, the play, written by Damien Millar, a co-production with the Melbourne Theatre Company and the expedition run in conjunction with the Arts Centre Melbourne on the Yarra River, in the city of Melbourne.

² 'Game fishing': when large fish such as marlin are pursued for sport by recreational anglers. Whilst the caught fish may be eaten, it is now common practice for anglers to return the fish to the water. The Queensland coastal towns of Townsville and Cairns are centres for game fishing.

The *Expedition*, scheduled in the same school holiday period as the play, took place on and around a (real) river, with the participants boarding a boat with an actor as ship's captain and engaging with the narrative whilst travelling down the river. According to Arena, by creating the two complementary experiences for young theatre goers, one as audience and the other as architects of their own version of a thematically connected story, the *Marlin* project sets out to extend the range of possible relationships the company generates with young people whilst continuing its 'own artistic and conceptual quest to further understand the dimensions and boundaries of the theatrical work it makes' (Arena Theatre Company 2015b). This case study looks specifically at the *Expedition* component of *Marlin* and its contribution to Arena's evolving body of work in, around and beyond conventional theatre forms. It should be noted that while the original intention of the evaluation was to examine the relationship between the mainstage and the immersive theatre events,³ by far the richest data to emerge from this process related to the *Expedition* as an example of both outreach and artistic inquiry. And, as an example of contemporary theatre practice targeted at young audiences, the *Expedition* also serves as an illustration of the way that Arena theatre understands and implements an 'educational project' as fundamental to its remit as a company making work for young people.

3 The Educational Project: As Humans We Don't Eat Our Own Brains

An essential first step in being creative is to question your own way of looking at things. (Robinson 2013)

The Arena Theatre Company does not claim an overt educational agenda. Their educational 'project' recognises the centrality of artistic connoisseurship in the creation of work that is rich, complex, challenging and executed with superior expertise and aesthetic finesse. Through this engagement with artworks that implicate the audience in the participatory act of 'responsible spectatorship', the artists at Arena theatre invite their young audience to consider the large questions of what it means to be human. It is on this scale that Leavesley drives the educational project of the company. The company's vision statement highlights this emphasis:

We believe that deep, authentic and ongoing dialogue with our audience is essential in maintaining a program that is authentic and engaged. For this reason we include a wide range of direct engagement processes through all stages of development, presentation and evaluation. (Arena Theatre Company 2015a)

³That is the two Expedition events – one in the Melbourne city centre and one in Footscray.

4 Case Study: Setting Free the Big Fish: The *Expedition*

4.1 *The Genesis*

On Play

Christian Leavesley, Artistic Director, Arena Theatre⁴:

The really simple answers come ... from the idea of a playground ... it's really the intent that the audience sees the playground and wants to play. Originally I was thinking this would be a three-layer thing... so you'd see the show, where you wouldn't have a role except to witness, then you would go on the expedition where we'd give you a role ... [then] we would put you in [essentially] the set, and have the bubbles going. Then you could play whatever you wanted to play inside it ... the idea is that there are these different forms and you understand different things by taking a different physical action within them, and by acting within these things differently, you understand them in a different way, and I felt like that's what we were getting from communications theory and convergence (McLuhan) ... we understand something different from the novel compared to the movie, compared to the radio play, so I didn't see any reason why theatre shouldn't do that ...

The conception of the *Marlin* Project began with serious contemplation of the playful experience. The concept evolved from 'bubbles' and the possibilities offered by the aesthetic and kinaesthetic dimensions of bubbles as landscape, set, and material object, to the construction of narrative, drawn both from the epic – the *Old Man and the Sea*, and the personal – the relationship between a grandfather and a daughter. Drawing on these inspirations, the creators of the *Marlin Project* wanted to explore form, and different ways of experiencing of narrative.

The juxtapositions of playful opportunity with epic narrative alongside Marshall McLuhan's Communications Theory (McLuhan and Fiore 1967) provide a powerful demonstration of a recurrent motif of Leavesley and James' work: Quest. In this instance, it was an intellectual quest which prompted new iterations of performer, audience and form: how could *the medium be the message*, they asked, as McLuhan did before them?

⁴The quoted text from Leavesley and James is derived from a post-production, reflective discussion held between the four authors in August 2015.

Audience Expectations

Jolyon James, Artistic Associate, Arena Theatre:

They [Expedition audience] didn't really know what it was, even as they were fronting up to it, they didn't know what form it would take, either, so it was difficult for them to have any strong understanding about that experience, whereas going to see a play, they knew what it was, it was on in a particular venue that they understood.

4.2 The Expedition

Last night an extraordinary fish was accidentally hauled up. Its life can only be saved by returning it to the deep – but our fisherman needs your help!

Join the fisherman's crew on his mission to save the marlin's life. (Arena Theatre Company 2015c)

4.2.1 Gathering⁵

The *Expedition* begins at the Victorian Arts Centre on Melbourne's Southbank, not far from the banks of the Yarra River. For each 'sailing', there is room for just three crew members (and up to three accompanying adults). The 'crew' is met by the 'Marine Controller' (Jolyon James), appropriately dressed in white polo shirt and jeans. He delivers a safety briefing and distributes bright orange life vests for the crew to wear. Following the safety briefing the crew is asked to help – the stakes are high; the marlin will die if it can't get back out to sea. The Marine Controller says 'do you think this is something that you can help us with, this is what we have to achieve, it's really serious?'

The Marine Controller leads the crew through the Southbank crowds down to the river. He explains that they have to walk the long way round due to the size of the boat, which can't be moored any closer because it can't travel under a particular bridge. As they walk, the Marine Controller radios the boat's captain. A big storm is brewing, but it's okay, he assures the Captain, the crew is experienced and can manage the storm. The crew are less certain (some are 'freaking out') and tell him that they actually don't know anything about boats. 'I can't call him back now', he tells them, so could you just play along with him? It'll be all right. 'Are we being asked to lie?' some of them ask: a little shocked and more than a little intrigued.

⁵ 'Gathering' – Richard Schechner's term to describe the preparatory phase of a theatre event, when the audience is drawn from disparate places and is propelled or guided onto the threshold of the play's beginning. (Schechner 1985).

The crew board the fishing boat, in reality a small blue dinghy, and are greeted by the captain, a mysterious and moody man. The crew members are assigned roles: one is given the two-way radio to communicate with shore; one is given the 'depthometer' to check when the ocean is deep enough to free the marlin; the third is tasked with the weather monitor, to keep an eye on any impending changes in the weather. The expedition is under way.

Dwelling in the Grey Zone

Jolyon:

They recognised that the safety briefing was a real thing, and there was no differentiation between that and pulling out a fictitious map, showing them the marlin scales, which weren't real, and then going from there, talking to the person on the boat. So that gave us our doorway into it being in that grey zone, and we never kind of flipped out of it from that point.

In this 'grey zone', artfully navigated by Jolyon in his 'twilight role'⁶ of Marine Controller, the audience was invited to commit, to agree not only to the fiction of the Yarra River as ocean and the tiny boat as enormous fishing trawler, but to themselves as crew, taking on the responsibility of returning the marlin to deep waters. Traversing the grey zone heightened the drama of the experience, raised the stakes and unified the disparate audience as crew members on a 'real' expedition.

For drama educators, the 'gathering' phase of this event has direct parallels with process drama. According to Cecily O'Neill, one of the early proponents of this form of educational drama:

Process drama is a complex dramatic encounter. Like other theatre events, it evokes an immediate dramatic world bounded in space and time, a world that depends on the consensus of all those present for its existence. (O'Neill 1995, p. xiii)

In the crafting of the *Marlin* expedition, as with process drama, there is:

- A pretext (the marlin in distress);
- A process of enrolling in the fiction (from safety briefing to boarding the boat and being assigned specific tasks);
- A Teacher in Role (Jolyon's Marine Controller – both functional facilitator and in role in the fiction);
- A moment of commitment leading to the 'consensus of all those present' – *will you help return the marlin to the ocean?*

⁶Drama educator Tiina Moore has extensively researched Dorothy Heathcote's use of 'twilight role.' She writes: Although twilight role had been subsumed by Teacher in Role over time, Heathcote spontaneously listed six functions for its specific use in the course of a short conversation. She included: hypothetical voice, seeking information or an interest, delaying or suspending action, conveying an attitude, the fiction forward into the 'we' stage, storytelling within action (private conversation, 8 April 2008). (Moore 2013, p. 18–19).

- And there is a problem (*there is something strange about this fisherman ...*); and, finally;
- The creation of an ‘immediate dramatic world, bounded in space and time’.

The complexity of the enrolling process is amplified when the audience/co-players are led through the public concourse down to the river. From Christian and Jolyon’s perspective, this strengthened the audience’s commitment to the drama, perhaps in the same way that young children, rather than being disrupted, commit more intensely to their dramatic play when in the midst of adults (Toye and Prendiville 2000).

Being the ‘Other’ in the Public Space

Christian:

walking parallel to the river with a big crowd ... I think the thing of walking past the people and the necessity of all that ... it’s the gaze of all the people at you that bolsters this idea that you are different today.

Jolyon:

It’s about being in a non-traditional theatrical space; you had to build the theatre with you in that live space.

Once in that hybrid space, between committing to being in an audience and consenting to being *in* the experience, the dramatic stakes are raised even higher. Not only is there a storm coming, but the young people, no longer in an audience, but crewing a fishing boat, are inexperienced, unprepared, and asked to ‘just go along with it’; to withhold their lack of expertise from the Captain. In a moment that may be potentially shocking to drama educators, trained in the ethics of ‘transparency’ and ‘duty of care’, the children are asked to ‘lie’. But what is this lie?: an invitation to enter further into the world of the play in which they are not spectators, but ‘spectators’ (Boal 1995).

For Christian and Jolyon and the other ‘creatives’ involved in the artistic fashioning of the event, there was a keen awareness that they were setting up a contract with their audience to believe in the expedition. By asking them to ‘take sides’, to knowingly concur firstly with the Marine Controller, and later with the Expedition’s captain in a ‘lie’ about the weather, the stakes were further raised. This occurred in the fictional world and in the theatrical world of the ‘play’. Leavesley uses words like ‘game’ to describe this transaction, rather than deception, or complicity. At each step of the ‘enrolling’ process, the young audience are challenged to fuse real world actions (the safety briefing, the life jackets) with fictional world devices (a ‘map’ of the territory they are to venture into, a dinghy standing in for a seagoing vessel). What would be considered duplicitous in a real world setting, is delicious ‘com-

plicité'⁷ in the world of the *Expedition*. In the careful and artful crafting of these worlds, ethical (or unethical) manipulation is side-stepped through the experience of metaxis.

O'Toole identifies the need in drama education practice to generate an artistic space in which participants can experience a deep immersion in the dramatic fiction whilst maintaining a consciousness of the dual nature of the experience, the phenomenon that Boal describes as 'metaxis'. O'Toole observes that when the

sensuous internalisation of meaning is ... externalised and made cognitively explicit, knowledge is generated. The knowledge that emerges as dramatic meaning is neither just propositional comprehension nor sensuous apprehension, it is a fusion of both. (O'Toole 1992 p.98)

In Boal's own words, metaxis is 'the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image' (1995, p. 43). In this sustained experience of metaxis, the young people step into their 'sea going' fishing vessel, collude with the Marine Controller and the Captain, see the 'flapping tail' of the marlin as it goes under the water (represented by some fish netting hung over the side of the boat), undertake the business of learning to use the 'instruments' they are given (lifelike props made by Jolyon). While this is taking place, they also choose to ignore the professionally employed helmsman who is actually driving the boat, but is not 'in' the play.

During the development of the immersive event, and as it was being performed, Jolyon began to draw explicitly on his actor training and background as a qualified teacher. The functional, front-of-house role he was asked to play as Marine Controller morphed into a nuanced and performative version of Teacher in Role. He drew on his introductory script and used it to negotiate the contract of agreement with the audience/spectators to actively contribute to the building of the imaginative world of the expedition. Both Leavesley and James acknowledge that this role may have evolved differently, if it had been in the hands of one of Arena's or the Arts Centre's front of house staff rather than one of the artistic associates involved with the production. For Leavesley, the evolution of this 'twilight' character captures something of the demands of this immersive and exploratory theatre form. According to Leavesley, James' role became an 'integral part of that, that we hadn't expected ... [he] invents this sort-of-character, sort-of-not, in between thing, and I think, for me, that's what the contemporary performer is'. Clearly there are implications here for future applications of this approach – the pedagogically inclined or trained actor could be critical to the success of an immersive interactive model.

⁷Complicité as used in French, and by the legendary theatre company Complicite, known for its playful and disruptive devised work. Defn(trans) feeling of understanding and each of communication between two or more people.

4.3 *Setting Free the Marlin*

As you venture out into the river, marlin in tow, help him navigate with a compass and radio. When a wild storm threatens to approach, it is up to you to guide him through rough seas and high winds. As you work together to save the marlin, the fisherman reveals more of his own stories about life at sea (Arena Theatre Company 2015c).

The boat sets out on its journey to the sea. Crew members communicate with Marine Control on the two-way radio, check the depth of the water to locate the place when the marlin can be released, and monitor the deteriorating weather. The fisherman is taciturn and continues to be mysterious. The warnings over the radio of the impending storm escalate. The crew is told to return to shore, but the fisherman ignores the instruction until the marlin is freed. Once the marlin is returned, the journey becomes dangerous – the storm is imminent. The fisherman instructs the crew to shelter under a tarp. The sounds of the storm (as provided by pre-recorded sound effects) overwhelm the boat, and it is buffeted in the waves now slapping at the bow. Eventually the storm subsides and as the boat nears shore, it glides under a bridge. In the surreal milky darkness under the bridge, the fisherman tells the crew of another expedition. He was out at sea with some businessmen on a game fishing trip. The storm came suddenly and their boat capsized, drowning all on board. His story is captured in a ballad, which he sings. The haunting melody echoes as the crew learns the tragic fate of the mysterious fisherman. The expedition is concluded. In total, they have been ‘at sea’ for 15 min. By the time they return their vests and gather their belongings, the 30-min round trip will be complete, in time for three more new crew members to be led down to the Yarra for their own, unique expedition.

5 Immersion: Narrative and Sensory

The *Expedition* is a dramatically intense and theatrically compressed 15-min journey on the Yarra River. Each of the three young people in the audience has a specific role to fulfill on the expedition. Not only do these roles further draw the audience into ‘spectator’ or percipient mode, but they continue to provide a safety function – while they are holding on to their ‘prop’, the children are compelled to stay in their seats – sitting down, no hands in water.

Jolyon as Marine Controller, in ‘twilight role’ hands over to Phil, the actor who is in role as the fisherman and captain of the boat. In bright spring sunshine, the audience experiences the terrible storm. With the ‘danger’ all around, the children take cover under a tarp, and the ‘storm’ is conveyed through an evocative soundscape, initiated when Phil turns on the sound equipment in the boat. Waves are generated by the wake of other boats, as the putative storm rages. When the boat moves under the bridge, the storm subsides, and the children are safe to emerge from under the tarp. This artful manipulation of real world elements and theatrical elements in a

non-theatrical site achieve a compression of time and emotion. The audience is safe but feels danger. When the emotional journey is at its height, there is a shift in tempo and performative mode. The fisherman sings the deeply evocative ballad which retells the story of his demise. This final 'reveal' of the narrative, that the fisherman is a ghost who was lost at sea serves two critical functions in the immersive experience. It moves the event into a heightened and stylised theatrical playing, which magnifies the experience while also creating an emotional distancing; and it provides the link to the mainstage production of *Marlin*. The fisherman in the boat is the lost father in the play, never seen, but mourned by the central character Billy as she too takes her own expedition to the sea, to set free a distressed marlin.

6 Dispersal⁸

When the boat docks, the children are met by Ali, from Arena, but also enrolled as Marine Control staff member, dressed in white polo shirt and jeans. She leads the crew, as one, unified by their experience, back up through the (now irrelevant) crowds on the riverbank to the 'Base'. On the way, she asks them about the expedition and whether they succeeded in setting free the big fish. The crew report on their many adventures. The young people are invited to fill out evaluations, to draw some aspect of their own expedition on a marlin 'scale' for exhibition in the foyer of the Base, and then they disperse. And, with a new group, the expedition begins again.

7 The Meaning of Success

The *Marlin* project – theatre production and *Expedition* – was a critical and box office 'success'. The *Expedition* season was fully booked and the responses to it by children and their accompanying adults was overwhelmingly positive. The theatre production had an interstate tour and was awarded 'Best Play' by Drama Victoria, representing the drama education community in Victoria. Through the lens of the *Marlin* project, the authors addressed the notion of success, considering how it is measured, evaluated, and benchmarked for works in development at Arena. Both Leavesley and James had strong reactions to the question of success.

Jolyon:

... we don't really talk about the success of it, we just make it amazing.

⁸Dispersal is also drawn from Schechner's categories of audience experience. At the conclusion of the theatrical experience there is a dispersal, important in audience meaning-making, just as the Gathering is. (Schechner 1995).

Leavesley deliberates on the concept of success as a mechanism for evaluating Arena's work and finds it too limited as a measure of effort and endeavour. He prefers to concentrate on notions of effort, and challenge and discipline. The discussion inevitably comes back to the quest for deeper and further investigations of art, art making and of the artist's role to provoke and disrupt – to reflect back, and to invite audiences into their own opportunities for cultural and social meaning making.

On Success

Christian:

... we're consistently talking about artwork that we love, and it's not necessarily theatre, and it's that conversation at that level, all the time, going, oh, wow, that is brilliant ... that's our bar. We just presume that we have to do something ... that we haven't done before but also as far as we know hasn't been done quite like that before, not in every way or in every moment, but as a broad ethos, so then when we talk about things, and say, next time, we can change that, how did that go for you? Yeah, that was good, but we thought that we could do a little bit better inside that moment, how would we do that? Oh, that structure... and so we're constantly also thinking about the better version of everything ...

I think there's another thing that goes with that, and it's a discipline that the young people provide us ... when we see the way the young people respond to it, then we know that it's worked, at least for that child, or that person at that time ... we've got a target, and so we've got this expansive set of possibilities, but we've also got a really clear audience that we want to work with, and I think that is an important part of us knowing 'success'.

In developing the immersive experience as a critical and ongoing component of Arena's program, Leavesley moves away from a discussion of metrics and argues for the efficacy of the 'small target' audience. He considers how the intimate, hands-on engagement between the young person and performative event can contribute to a powerful and meaningful theatre experience. For Leavesley, the opportunity for the child to be able to take an active part in *living through* the immersive performance returns him to his deep interest in the role of play in the development of imagination and learning for the child.

Arena Theatre has a longstanding interest in better understanding its audiences and the impact of its work and has featured in previous research projects and reports investigating audience reception (Cahill and Smith 2002; Jordan 2001; Myers 2003; TheatreSpace 2012). Historically and in present times, Arena Theatre has found a balance between vigorous reflection and review of the efficacy of its work on terms such as those currently espoused by Artistic Director Leavesley, and the expectations of funding bodies, managing boards and the wider public for accountable,

evidence-based measures of success. For example, in recent savage government funding cuts to the youth theatre sector, Arena Theatre was one of only three companies Australia wide to retain its funding. Over time, the creative and operational managers of Arena Theatre have become highly skilled at articulating their vision for complex and quality-driven programming while also demonstrating their effectiveness at delivering such programs. In the Arena model, metrics relating to box office, critical acclaim and fiscal responsibility support a more sophisticated narrative of aspiration, imagination, artistic excellence and engagement.

8 Conclusion

Early exposure to positive arts experiences correlates to later interest in and engagement with the arts (Positive Solutions 2003 p. 5). A key focus of the evaluation referred to in this chapter was Leavesley's (and thus, Arena Theatre Company's) desire to understand the ways in which young audience members (aged 8–12) perceived and made sense of the two components of the *Marlin* theatre experience. There was an implicit interest in ways in which this theatre/immersion model could be developed and adapted for future productions.

The *Marlin* project resonated across the two allied practices of drama education and theatre for young people. For the authors of this chapter and for the theatre company involved, there was much to be learned by teasing out the underlying principles of dramatic play and process drama, and the ways in which they informed and were adapted for this explicitly theatrical enterprise. Even though the Arena personnel involved in the *Marlin* project did not explicitly link the conventions they employed in their active collaboration with audiences to the traditions of process drama and dramatic play it was evident that they were adept at, and had expertise in, applying those conventions. The theatre makers and the performers worked intuitively and with great skill in realising the two complementary theatre events. The evaluation suggests that the artful fusion of theatre performance skills with the process oriented skills of drama pedagogy has taken Arena to the cusp of an exciting evolution in their theatrical repertoire. While initially Leavesley was focused in the MGSE evaluation on how the two complementary theatre forms 'spoke' to each other for their audiences, this interest broadened over time to a consideration of how the interactive theatre form of the *Expedition* could now be further elaborated and incorporated into the programming of the company. Notably, since the *Marlin* project was staged in 2014, work has progressed on a number of new interactive projects: some of them stand alone events, and some, like the *Expedition*, companions to formal theatre productions.⁹

⁹ *The Sleepover* – stay overnight in the theatre, explore the parts of the theatre that nobody sees – premiered in 2015; *Trapper*: a hybrid artwork that is part performance and part machine – to premier in 2016.

The aligning of theatre for young people and drama education processes in their work is an aspect of Arena's repertoire which warrants further, close analysis. While the evaluation commissioned by Arena signalled some elements of these parallel processes, a more sustained and more deeply embedded research project would yield greater and more specific insights regarding the mirroring of these two traditions within Arena theatre's contemporary practice. Such research will not only be of benefit to Arena but to other theatre for young people companies that wish to produce immersive theatrical experiences, which draw on drama education traditions.

According to theatre scholar Matthew Reason, young people are 'enthralled' by the sense that the action of a live performance event is taking place in front of them in real time (2005, p. 9). Further, the theatre event is transient and is a phenomenon whose meanings and outcomes are negotiated in the live theatre space by performers and spectators in collaboration (Martin and Sauter 1995; Sauter 1997, 2000; Bennett 1990; Prendergast 2004; Schechner 1985). When the Arena Theatre Company invites young audiences to board the little blue boat, three at a time, they are offered a singular opportunity to experience the live telling of a story, in visceral 3D, while simultaneously *living through* their own imaginative enactment of a grand adventure, in which they survive a great storm and set the big fish free. This is the present success and tantalizing potential of the *Marlin Expedition* for Arena and other companies making work with and for young people.

Anyone who tries to make a distinction between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either (Marshall McLuhan).

References

- Arena Theatre Company. (2015a). *Our vision: What makes us tick*. <http://www.arenatheatre.com.au/about-us/our-vision>. Accessed 2 Sept 2015.
- Arena Theatre Company. (2015b). *Arena Theatre Company, Marlin*. <http://www.arenatheatre.com.au/show/marlin>. Accessed 2 Sept 2015.
- Arena Theatre Company. (2015c). *Marlin expedition*. <http://www.arenatheatre.com.au/show/the-marlin-expedition>. Accessed 20 Sept 2015.
- Bennett, S. (1990). *Theatre audiences: A theory of production and reception*. London: Routledge.
- Boal, A. (1995). *The rainbow of desire: The Boal method of theatre and therapy* (A. Jackson, Trans.). New York: Routledge.
- Cahill, H., & Smith, G. (2002). *A pilot study of Arena Theatre Company's audiences*. Melbourne: Melbourne. Australian Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne.
- Hemingway, E. (1954). *The old man and the sea*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Jackson, A. (Ed.). (1993). *Learning through theatre: New perspectives on theatre in education* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Jackson, A., & Vine, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Learning through theatre: The changing face of theatre in education* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Jordan, N. (2001) 'Controversial art': *Investigating the work of director Rosemary Myers*. Unpublished Masters thesis. University of Melbourne, <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/38820>. Accessed 1 Sept 2015.

- Martin, J., & Sauter, W. (1995). *Understanding theatre: Performance analysis in theory and practice*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The medium is the message: An inventory of effects*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Moore, T. (2013). Revisiting Dorothy Heathcote's "Twilight Role". *NJ*, 37, 14–24.
- Myers, R. (2003). *Arena's approaches to young audiences*. Paper presented at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, 2003.
- O'Neill, C. (1995). *Drama worlds: A framework for process drama*. Canada: Pearson Education.
- O'Toole, J. (1992). *The process of Drama: Negotiating art and meaning*. London: Routledge.
- Positive Solutions. (2003). *Review of theatre for young people in Australia: A detailed overview of current issues within the subsidised theatre for young people sector in Australia. Commissioned by the Theatre Board in partnership with the NSW Ministry for the Arts*. Sydney: Australia Council and NSW Ministry for the Arts.
- Prendergast, M. (2004). Theatre audience education or how to see a play: Toward a curriculum theory for spectatorship in the performing arts. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 18(1), 45–54.
- Reason, M. (2005). *Young audiences & live theatre, an investigation into perceptions of live performance*. https://www.academia.edu/642052/_Young_Audiences_and_Live_Theatre_. Accessed 2 Sept 2015.
- Robinson, K. (2013). *To encourage creativity, Mr Gove, you must first understand what it is*. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/17/to-encourage-creativity-mr-gove-understand>. Accessed 2 Sept 2015.
- Sauter, W. (1997). Approaching the theatrical event: The influence of semiotics and hermeneutics on European theatre studies. *Theatre Research International*, 22(1), 4–13.
- Sauter, W. (2000). *The theatrical event: Dynamics of performance and perception*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between theatre and anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- TheatreSpace. (2012). *The TheatreSpace Project, accessing the cultural conversation (July 2012)*. http://education.unimelb.edu.au/about_us/specialist_areas/arts_education/research/accessing_the_cultural_conversation. Accessed Sept 2015.
- Toye, N., & Prendiville, F. (2000). *Drama and traditional story for the early years*. London: Routledge Falmer.