

Digital Natives and Theatre: How Young People Are Re-defining The Way We Consume Culture

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The institutionalised arts have long faced issues with engaging new and younger audiences. Particularly since the dawn of the digital age, theatre and other live performing arts organisations have seen a steady decline in Young People showing up in their foyers. New generations are not taking up the same cultural opportunities as generations before them, and Young People are not engaging with the arts in the same way that other generations have done.

Particularly for Young People, cultural experiences have the potential to transform lives through the sharing of knowledge and dialogue, the promotion of critical thinking, tolerance and respect, and by contributing to social understanding. While art and culture can delight, move and surprise, they also play a unique role in imagining different ways of how communities can live together, and shaping the minds of generations that learn to do so.

THE PROBLEM:

Young People are not taking up the same opportunities

Individual organisations and arts institutions across Australia have on many occasions tried to bridge the gap using implemented digital engagement strategies, discounted ticket offers and membership schemes, often modelled on successful examples used internationally, to engage younger audiences; for example, the Adelaide Festival Centre's GreenRoom arts membership for 18 – 30 Year Olds, Sydney Theatre Company's Suncorp Twenties scheme, as well as numerous institutions using varied ticketing tiers offering discounts to Under 30 Year Olds. And still, the theatre industry as a whole has not succeeded at infiltrating the digital space occupied by Young People. Coming up against generations born with the digital world at their fingertips, organisations steeped in tradition and often held back by obligations to satisfy their existing subscribers don't stand a chance.

First proposed as part of the City of Sydney's new cultural policy, the City called out for a more collective, holistic solution to service theatre and other live performing arts organisations. Shopfront Arts Co-op, a South-Sydney based and youth-led arts cooperative with a 42-year old history of making theatre with young people aged 8 – 26, responded to the call-out in one most revolutionary way: by talking to Young People and asking them why. Which are the barriers that prevent them from accessing live performance? Why are they not visiting our theatres, engaging with our organisations, setting foot in our venues? What can we change?

“Arts institutions need to evolve in order to compete with digital entertainment and grow their audiences of the future.” – Daniel Potter, CEO Shopfront Arts Co-op

The most significant barriers, which surfaced from this collective research, boiled down to the following three areas: *Payment*, *Place* and *People Like Us*. Not only do young people have financial restrictions and a lack of means to purchase tickets online through typical payment gateways, but the majority of them also have geographical and time restrictions on their ability to access live performance in Sydney.

PAYMENT

Beyond financial restrictions and often unaffordable price points of most live performances for Young People, teenagers aged 15 – 20 rarely have access to credit cards or electronic money needed to purchase tickets online. In addition to that, each venue or organisation operates on a different booking system, and often requires the customer to create a unique profile using an email address a 15-year-old might not have access to outside of school, making the first step towards accessing a live performance a difficult one at best.

PLACE

The barrier of Place spans a number of concerns, both for a Young Person as well as their parents or guardians. Most cultural events, including theatre shows, tend to happen in neighbourhoods or areas of the city that are not always perceived as safe for Young People. Particularly as the majority of events happen at night, travel to and from a venue can often be difficult and not always safe for a Young Person.

In addition to that and perhaps just as importantly, often Young People are not aware of cultural events happening in their resident areas. Although most residential areas boast smaller venues, performances in community spaces or council halls, not many Young People are aware of those offerings or feel that these spaces are made for them. Which highlights the final, and most crucial barrier to entry, which we like to refer to as ‘People like Us’.

PEOPLE LIKE US

Most importantly, Young People do not feel that the spaces of our cultural sector are made for them. They do not see themselves reflected in the foyers of our venues, the stories told within them and the language used to tell those stories.

Picture a 15 year-old keen to attend a theatre show, who overcomes the many hurdles posed by *Payment* and *Place* – they organise their group of friends to go see a show, convince their parents to book tickets for them, put in place transport to and pick-ups from an event – they often arrive at a venue where they are not made to feel welcome. Often they look around at a foyer that is not designed for them, filled with an audience that looks nothing like them, decorated with marketing materials not prepared with Young People in mind. ‘Art’, ‘Theatre’ and ‘Culture’ are perceived as heritage words by Young People, who do not identify with an industry that still celebrates and operates under this language.

As a result, more often than not, the only theatre-going experience a Young Person experiences during their formative years happens either through attending a show with their families, or being taken to a performance as part of a school excursion. Once they graduate from high school, or become bored of going out with their parents, why would they make the decision of returning to the theatre out of their own accord? Having never experienced going to the theatre as a social and enjoyable activity, with their friends, or even as a representation of their own experiences, they don't feel welcome in what can often be intimidating "adult" spaces.

The Solution: Creating A Space Where Artists And Young People Can Connect

"We want to make it easier. Young people are quite willing to try things but they need to feel that they are allowed to try arts and culture and that it is catering for them."

– Daniel Potter, CEO Shopfront Arts Co-op

Despite the decline in attendance of cultural events by under 20 year olds, Young People are more like artists than ever before. Born digital natives and constantly connected through their devices, they are hungry for social connection and meaningful engagement that reflects their experience of being a Young Person. Every teenager today is used to creating content, curating their own live feeds and being the producer of their own social persona – and our cultural institutions often just can't keep up.

A City of Sydney audited research conducted in 2015 found that the most googled phrase of Young People aged 15 – 20 in NSW was 'I'm bored'. So despite the common perception that teenagers are constantly glued to their mobile devices, it is the space that exists between two screens that excites them – the potential for creativity, social connection and experiences that engage them beyond their immediate surroundings.

Young People are critical thinkers. They are cultural citizens. They want to be engaged. They don't want to feel excluded. So how do we make that happen?

How do we create a space where Young People can connect with the artistic, cultural and live opportunities of our time? How do we give them access to cultural experiences, a tool crucial to the development of any person's understanding of the world, and make them realise their own creative potential?

After collating the research from conversations with Young People as well as secondary sources and international examples, the answer to the City of Sydney's proposal seemed simple: what if, instead of competing for audiences, the sector came together to create a space for Young People to connect with the cultural offerings of our time in a way that feels familiar to them?

Playwave: It's Art. But different.

Playwave is an initiative created by Shopfront Arts Co-op with the support of the City of Sydney as well as a range of media and presenting partners to make the Arts in Sydney more accessible to Young People. A digital platform connecting Young People to the best Creative Opportunities, Playwave tries to bridge the gaps to engagement and overcome the barriers of *Payment, Place* and, particularly, *People Like Us*.

Launched alongside the 2018 Sydney Festival program, Playwave now partners with over 40 institutions across Greater Sydney in an attempt to break down barriers to participation in arts and culture for Young People aged 15 – 20 in three main ways:

- By providing discounted tickets to events across theatre, dance, visual arts, festivals, music and more to now over 40 participating venues, companies and festivals across Greater Sydney.
- Through a series of events called 'Playwave Experiences' which provide safe spaces for Young People – who may never have consciously engaged with the arts before – to feel welcome in the cultural spaces of our time.
- By working with a core group of young creatives to produce youth-led, relevant content about our cultural city, and to provide professional opportunities for Young People interested in pursuing a career in the arts.

This program provides an exclusive online space for Young People to engage with the stories of our time in a way that feels familiar. Bringing the Arts into their screens, members get a chance to participate in the live and unrivalled experiences of our cultural sector. Playwave recognises the existing habits of Young People and their desire to connect with each other and the world, firstly through digital content and an easy-to-use platform, which then entices and encourages them to attend the live events, performances and venues of our cultural sector.

Most importantly, Playwave was created with Young People, by Young People, for Young People, and by listening to the voices of Young People, Playwave connects them to the Arts and artists of our industry as well as creating a space where they can feel that the Arts are there for them; removing barriers, enticing them with relevant and engaging experiences and creating new opportunities to connect with our culture, stories and venues.

HOW IT WORKS

As a non-for-profit initiative collaborating with arts companies and venues across Greater Sydney, Playwave now:

- Utilises a small guaranteed ticket allocation and activates unused assets (unsold tickets) within cultural venues to provide to Young People at a low cost.
- Encourages and facilitates new forms of content through innovative channels of connection for Young People with the arts.

- Collaborates strongly with both Young People and partner organisations to overcome barriers to participation, to address the issue of under-representation of Young People in audiences and an ageing community of cultural audiences.
- Develops and builds future engaged audiences and supporters of the arts through engagement of Young People in the Playwave program.
- Develops metrics and collects data, which will provide insights into the taste, buying and attendance behaviour of Young People in the arts, across the sector, for the benefit of all participating organisations.

PLAYWAVE IN YOUR SCHOOL

We're inviting you and your students to connect with us and arts organisations across Greater Sydney and beyond in a few different ways...

- By signing up to Playwave for free at playwave.com.au/pages/become-a-member or by contacting hello@playwave.com.au. Our Playwave membership platform is free and offers 15-20 year olds opportunities, discounted tickets and VIP behind-the-scenes arts experiences.
- By booking discounted tickets through your school via your CAPA and English teachers. Simply get in touch at hello@playwave.com.au.
- By showcasing their creative skills as part of Playwave Creative, our team of Young People who love writing, filmmaking, performing, or storytelling of any kind. We are keen to attract a creative team from across NSW schools, bringing a diverse range of talents and interests, and we'd love for your students to apply. Playwave Creative is open to 15-20 year olds with a passion for creative storytelling and a dream of connecting with art, artists and the Arts industry. Whether your students are writers, designers, film-makers, performers, storytellers, or social media gurus, we would love to hear their Playwave story. Apply at playwave.com.au/pages/creative.
- Playwave is reaching beyond borders and may soon be in your city, state or regional area. To find out more about how Playwave is evolving and submit an expression of interest to partner with Playwave as a school, email hello@playwave.com.au.

Our membership platform is designed for, and informed by Young People to give them a safe place to engage with the Arts, and each other.

It's Art. But different.

Valentina Corona is the Director of Young Audience Development at Shopfront Arts Co-op in charge of Playwave, a new partnership with over 40 cultural organisations across Greater Sydney to make the arts more accessible to Young People. She is also a Creative Producer with a background in arts journalism, marketing and PR, and has worked across arts festivals in Adelaide and Edinburgh. Valentina is passionate about what the arts mean to Young People, and how collaboration can ensure the creative industries continue to be a space for opportunity and success for artists, cultural workers and their audiences.