

'BE A GUMBY AND MIND THE GAP, DEXTER!'

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I'd like to open by posing a few questions to you for your consideration...

What have you always wanted to do, but never been game to try?

What happened on the best day of your life?

What would you like to be most famous for and why?

Ok, so this Annette can also rock black leather and crimped hair, but did NOT hate school; I am not coveting her 'Fifty Shades' inspired plans; nor do I intend on pursuing a song writing career, just yet...But I do envy her access to Dexter, who helped reveal that she was on the wrong path. However, I am not referring to a Perfect Match of the romantic kind. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all had our very own Dexter in life to help us navigate through all manner of decisions? In this instance, I am thinking of those made within the context of our audience today. Well, why not try? Let me introduce our next potential Perfect Match contenders.

Contestants Number One have been described as 'both the bearers of the flame or the crippling negative influence' by John Bell (2013, p.v) who also notes their dedication and generosity (Bell 2013, p.vi); while John O'Toole acknowledges them for their ability to ignite a love of theatre, enabling their participation in theatre, in fact, more than some theatre companies may realise (2014, p.10).

Contestants Number Two want to attract young audiences to their productions with some 'engaging with young people as central to their mission' while others view them 'in more mercantile terms' according to Robyn Ewing and her Sydney University counterparts (Ewing, Fleming & Hughes 2014, p.99). John Sheedy offers some comfort to Contestants Number Two, noting that 'making work for young people is way tougher than adult audiences and that they are the most painfully honest audience on the planet' (keynote address, 2014).

I welcome here today representatives from the camps of both contestants. Contestants Number One: the Performing Arts Educators. I identify as one of you. With over twelve years of formal school experience in the areas of Dance and Drama from Prep to Year 12, I understand your plight. I am also familiar with the world of arts education beyond the classroom: private performing arts tuition and exams, eisteddfods, co-curricular activities, amateur groups and other often thankless beasts.

I also welcome those here to fly the flag for Contestants Number Two: the Performing Arts Companies and Industry professionals. I welcome the creators, the lovers, and at times, the haters and, thanks to my few years at the helm of Drama Queensland, the companies with which I work alongside

and to which I willingly volunteer my time. I also welcome my friends and loved ones who professionally occupy this sphere. I feel that I have a mere taste of your journey; not a whole degustation, but enough to know the flavour of your labour.

You may wonder why Dexter, the love-matching robot, has any business being present here at EPAM. Had I not been fortunate enough to be exposed to a wide range of education contexts and performing arts organisations and settings, through my broad range of roles and commitments, I may not have seen his relevance either. But what has become plain to me is that we NEED a match-maker, a hand-shaker and, at times, rule breakers. As Ewing, Hughes and Fleming stated in the 2014 publication *Young Audiences, Theatre and the Cultural Conversation*, 'the Australia Council's call for more engagement between arts organisations and schools is timely' (p.111). John Sheedy supported this view in his keynote address at Drama Queensland's 'Revitalise' event in October 2014, observing that 'the value of our performing arts companies in the education system is a social and economic imperative'. Contestants Number One and Two, we are better off with each other. Sandra Gattenhof acknowledged that the theatre for young people is a 'landscape... [which] is slippery and malleable and will shift again' (2005, p.27). We need to be ready for these changes, but in order to do so, we must first note the difference between what we DO know about each other, what we THINK we know, what we DON'T know, and what we SHOULD know. Ultimately, we need to MIND THE GAP.

The more care and respect we demonstrate for the differences among the worlds to which we belong, the better chance we will have of fulfilling Bell's belief that young people can remain 'turned on by the *liveness* and immediacy of the theatre experience' (2013, p.v). Mind the Gap.

So, in the spirit of all things romantic, I would like to pen a love letter to the teachers and educators out there. Ewing, Hughes and Fleming stated that 'schools – and teachers – are highly important to theatre companies and venues concerned with developing new audiences' (2014, p.111). Sinclair and Adams, in the same text, view the teacher and the school context as crucial in the establishment and development of theatre confidence (2014, p.139). Bell goes even further to sympathise with teachers as, in his opinion, things have become much more challenging for teachers wanting to take students to the theatre during school as part of their curriculum programs (2013, p.vi). Teachers, you carry the torch and pass on a love for the arts; you are crucial to the creation of young people as the stakeholders of the future, whom Sheedy also sees as 'the sponsors of the future...the media of the future, they are, in every way, the future' (keynote address 2014). The performing arts industry benefits from your guidance of young people into the arts, of young people as artists, and of current professional artists through patronage, theatre attendance, workshops, masterclasses, artist-in-residence models and more.

However, educators, in true report card-writing sandwich-style, you also have some criticisms in your comments, with one of the key informants of the *Young Audiences, Theatre and the Cultural Conversation* publication believing that 'something that you have to do as part of school is just one step above medicine in terms of desirable' (2014, p.100); others in the same study reported that 'curriculum demands could lead to an over-analysis of the production at the expense of an aesthetic and emotional response' (2014, p.109); others again believed that the future of young people as theatre goers was limited by teachers often making 'safe decisions' and feeling more drawn to the works of established writers or classics (2014, p.101). It seems that Contestants Number One have some improving to do. Do we need to make theatre-going and the experience of live performing arts less prescriptive and methodical? Do we err on the side of caution too often, or even worse, are we bullied by the ever present extra pressures of time and the increase in red tape which discourages many teachers? (Bell, 2013, p.vi). Guilty, at times. But, to end the 'report card sandwich' in true school style - that is, by looking to the future - we should embrace John Sheedy's hope that our challenge is 'not educating (the students) into creativity but ensuring that we don't educate them out of it' (keynote address 2014). Challenge accepted.

Now, you performing artists and passionate company personnel, bravo! A standing ovation to you all. As Ewing, Fleming and Hughes perceive, your organisations are, by and large, attempting to make your productions more accessible to young people in a variety of areas, and they are turning their focus in artistic decision-making a little more towards young people in the artistic decisions that they make (2014, p.110). Others were sincerely concerned that 'key creative decision-makers associate their artistic visions with their perceptions of performance and young people' (2014, p.107). But sadly, your reviews were not all 'five stars', with research finding that 'mainstream theatre companies often fail to connect to the cultural interests and stories of young people' (2014, p.107). Adding salt to the wound, a previous Artistic Director from our pretty city claimed that when programming a season of work, 'we don't aim it at anyone. I always think as soon as you start aiming a thing at anybody you're not going to get them. You do what you think is right, and people will come: that's my view' (Gow in Fleming, Ewing & Hughes 2014, p.108). Seems harsh...or is it? For many of the companies in this room, young people are not necessarily your core business or part of your main company mission. So educators, or Contestants Number One, should we not be glad that we are given the chance to interact with such a broad range of companies, within which we can surely find our Perfect Match? And Contestants Number Two, how wonderful it is, that you can pursue your organisational and creative agenda but still benefit from the interest, ticket sales and buzz generated by young audiences. Sinclair and Adams see the 'theatre excursion in which young people are scaffolded into new understanding through careful preparation and productive post-show discourse' (2014, p.139) as pivotal in the future of the theatre landscape. In her 2005 keynote address, Gattenhof stated her belief that contemporary theatre for young people has the potential to be 'considered to be at the cutting edge of performance and theatre practice in this country' (2005, p.27).

Yes: there is and can be a Perfect Match. But first, we need to 'mind the gap' and be respectful of the differences that exist in the challenges we face in our often overlapping, similar and undoubtedly mutually reciprocal and beneficial arenas. Just because we all went to school does not mean we understand the ever evolving terrain that is education and the schooling system today. While progressive in many ways, the school setting is still a product of the industrial revolution. Educators know about the bureaucracy, politics and limitations that prevent us from engaging with performing arts companies and teaching artists at times. But we want to. When we have the funds, the time allowance, the administrative support and creative followers, Contestants Number Two, you'll never find more loyal followers than Contestants Number One. And Contestants Number Two, our artists and organisations, we hear of your resourcing, funding, space and personnel cuts. We are learning that you are battle weary, worn down by the juggling of production, administration and marketing duties before you even switch on your artistic sides. But know that your creative light, which to you may merely be a sparking ember, can, to us or to our students and young people, be a fire that burns and sparks the love for our profession, for their futures, and can often be what gets us through the, at times, mundane drone of the school bell. We want our school funds in your pockets, and we want this industry to grow.

So, while Dexter may seem like the ultimate pin-up boy for Performing Arts Organisations and Education settings, one who computes the suitability of a match and spews forth a percentage based result on Z-fold, perforated edged paper, I propose a different mascot.

No, not Gumby himself, but a hybrid: a half Gumby, half Dexter, flexible, malleable being, with a desire to be environmentally conscious or green, dedicated to arranging the most suitable pairings between education and arts contexts to create love matches that are nothing short of 'perfect'. This may seem dreamy, like Greg Evans' hair and, despite the fact that Ewing, Hughes and Fleming insist that tensions are rife between artistic and educational goals (2014, p.100), it is a pursuit which I feel is worthy of our energy and commitment. This area of debate is not a new one; hence, the continual research and case studies which exist and which prompt the publication of new texts and delivery of fresh keynotes. However, it is a crucial one. It requires transparency between stakeholders, documentation of recent case studies to advertise the success of the potential union between the two bodies at stake, respect, clear communication, and resistance of the urge to judge or make stereotypical comments about the other party. Ultimately, it requires the ability to MIND THE GAP.

We can champion the plight of *GUMTER*? No. *DEXBY*? Perhaps! And allow the performing arts to, as John Sheedy put it, not just create 'theatre goers and makers for the future' (keynote address 2014), but to satisfy young people as the audiences of today.

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