



Making a living out of theatre

“One has to question the importance our society places on the arts”

As she stands in the wings clutching her call sheet with sweaty hands Elise Dorian peers through the curtain anxiously, hoping to see a full auditorium.

It is opening night at the Heidelberg Theatre Company Youth production of *Ruby Moon* and the theatre is two thirds full. After months of rehearsals and a stressful six hour tech-run, director Dorian has lost her voice. All she can do is whisper a quick, croaky good luck speech to her cast.

As the lights come up over the cosy living room set and the audience falls to a deepening silence, Dorian's heart races with a quick thumping tone; little does she know this level of anxiety will foreshadow her life long goal of working in the Australian theatre industry.

Employment in the field is based on networking, luck and patience.

The director of Union House Theatre Tom Gutteridge says it would be foolish not to realise there are risks within the industry. “The theatre can be totally unpredictable.”

Considering recent polls show established directors who can consistently get work within Australia sits at 18-20 members,

opportunities within the profitable theatre world are slim. Profitable may be the wrong word to use given that directors get paid approximately \$10,000 per production. Assuming a director could work at full capacity, directing four productions a year they would only gross \$40,000. When a full-time retail store manager can make more than our country's artistic icons, one has to question the importance our society places on the arts.

Gutteridge notes, “Money is not the main motivation for people wanting to work in the theatre industry.”

There is no payment involved in HTC Youth, but the opportunity to be part of a play in a proper theatre is one that many passionate young thespians love.

“We don't get grants from the government and the council,” HTC Youth Coordinator Jessica Cole explains.

“We get our funding as the Youth from the main committee.”

Any money that a production makes goes back into the company, to fund the next production. No one involved earns a wage, no matter how much money the play makes. The aim is to put on a good show rather than make money. Despite zero


earnings Dorian says, “I love every moment of it. Seeing everyone's faces light up when they come off stage, its just so rewarding.”

For young enthusiasts like Dorian there is no clear pathway to theatrical success but Melbourne University theatre expert Paul Monaghan's advice is to “put yourself in the way of opportunities,” and to create your own content.

He warns “if you wait around for funding you won't make much theatre.”

This attitude is reflective of the HTC Youth group as they worked together to overcome financial limitations. The main HTC donated a previous set used for their production of *Cloudstreet*, which the entire cast pitched in to modify and make their own.

And at the end of the show as the cast of HTC Youth take their bow, an uneasy concern hangs over the theatre.

For the audience the missing case of *Ruby Moon* is never solved; for the cast and production crew, they question what future, if any, the Australian theatre industry has in store for them. 

Julia Foskey
Claire McGarry

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