Certain taboos have lost their aura over time. There is relative ease today in speaking publicly about social issues including teenage pregnancy, safe sex practices, female sexuality and violence against women. What were once subjects whispered about in private and put in the too–hard basket are now subjects you regularly hear about in the media, in schools and everyday conversation.

So which taboos remain? Working politically with young people in theatre and performance contexts can certainly cause discomfort and debate. The question I would like to explore in this paper is in giving young people political agency to speak, is their innocence tampered with? What is “innocence” in a globalised age where young people can access just about any subject or image at the touch of a keyboard? What debates and shifts occur when innocence is tampered with? How does this affect participants and audience reception? By giving young people political agency —does that deem theatre practitioners unsafe?
I am not a writer, academic or researcher, I am a theatre practitioner who has worked with young people in a theatre and performance context in Western Sydney for ten years. What I write in this paper are observations I have made and experiences I have had directing and producing theatre with, by and for young people. Western Sydney is the most culturally diverse region in Australia. It is home to the largest migrant, refugee and urban Indigenous populations in the country. It has the largest youth population in Australia and is home to the highest rates of unemployment, crime and violence, drug use and diabetes to name but a few.

As a theatre practitioner in one of the most culturally diverse regions in Australia, I utilize cross-media art forms to realise concepts and to produce work that says something. My practice is driven by a desire to push diversity into public places and spheres; by a desire to make space for stories and for creative expression, spaces that intersect our public and private lives and all the spaces in–between; by a desire to engage with communities, in particular young people, in creative practice and cultural exchange. My work is informed by popular culture, cultural identity and by the places and spaces that young people inhabit. In my practice, I invite audiences/artists/communities to ask questions about their place(s) in the world. Most recently (2005–2010), I was the Artistic Director of Powerhouse Youth Theatre (PYT), Western Sydney’s leading and only full time funded youth Theatre Company.

I am interested in voice, the story, the lived
experiences and dreams especially of young people. More often than not, young people’s voices are subordinated because their voices are not valued. We live in an ageist environment, where it is not uncommon to hear such statements as: “You have no experience”, “You are too young too understand”, “We know what’s best for you”, and the patronising, “You remind me of my youth...” Ageism is about discrimination and attempts to disempower young people and make them feel under–valued.

For my part, I want to know what they think. I want their advice and their opinion on current affairs and future directions. I want to hear their ideas and their voices. It is these very voices that need to be heard and it is their experiences of the world that need to be valued and acted upon. They are the future–right?

The idea that children and young people’s participation must be considered and the right to have a say in the political, economic and social structures of society has been gaining momentum in the last few decades.¹ Before I embark on the process of directing a work, I create spaces in order for young people to respond creatively to the political and social contexts in which they exist. The process is always led by a set of questions. And this is where the magic begins.

In this paper I will be discussing three projects I do...but, Hard Daze and Can You Hear Me?. Each was made

¹. NSW Commission for Children and Young People.
in consultation and collaboration with young people living, working and or studying in Western Sydney. The paper will address what takes place when a space is handed over to young people to create works that have meaning for them across time and space.

“I want to say something...”
Hannah Jekki. Participant in I do...but.

In 2006, my co–director and I embarked on a youth specific project with young people from Middle Eastern and South Asian communities to create a site specific performance extravaganza in a wedding reception centre in South West Sydney.

The idea was to give participants control over the project, to provide them with a space where they can express themselves creatively about what it meant to be a young person, living in Western Sydney and dealing with scrutiny of been a young person of “Middle Eastern Appearance”\(^2\).

We are living in an era of racialised fear and young people are made to feet that burden in their everyday interactions. On one hand Australian federal policies and newspeak promote ideologies of cultural harmony, and a happier, safer and more tolerant world. But on the streets of “multicultural” Australia, many people go about their

\(^2\) A term used by Australian authorities to identify criminals.
insulated lives in segregated communities because of the fear and hype surrounding “other” communities, and in particular TWLP–Third World Looking People. More often than not TWLP live only a few streets away in their own communities, and there is little or no contact with, and knowledge of, other cultural groups. This lack of knowledge means many are unable to distinguish or understand the difference between diverse cultural communities.

Young people performed *I do...but* at The Ambassador Lounge, a wedding reception centre in Western Sydney, with the audience as their guests of honour. *I do...but* was a production that delved into ethnic identity politics and the oppositional relations of “us” and “them” in contemporary Australian society. Through working on this production, the participants discovered that the cultural nuances that originally seemed to divide them could actually bring them closer together. That is why the context of a wedding was chosen to explore issues of identity and ethnicity, as the wedding ritual is a shared experience across many cultures.

Calls were made out to young people from Middle Eastern and South Asian communities to participate in a show that looked at their identity post September 11, post the Bali Bombings, post London 7/7 bombings and post the Cronulla Riots. The response from the community in Western Sydney was strong, with young people and

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individuals becoming interested in examining and making work around this theme. Workshops were held over three months and through various workshops, such as Hip Hop and Bollywood dancing, the participants were able to turn their emotional responses and ideas about these issues into a live performance. Apart from an all-singing, all dancing wedding extravaganza, the performance offered an insight into the lives and thinking of young people who live, work and study in Western Sydney, through examining the racial tensions they encounter in their everyday lives. The audience was invited to consider new Australian identities that represent the diversity of Australian experiences.

The making of *I do...but* was divided into three stages: Stage One was the community consultation and creative development, Stage Two: the research and skills development, and Stage Three: the actual performance. We posed the following question to the participants and artists, which then became the basis for this work:

1. Why do young people want to come to this?
2. How do the governments anti terror laws affect us?
3. How do the London Bombing’s affect us?
4. What political baggage are we walking in the room with?

4. In 2005 there were violent racial attacks on people of “Middle Eastern Appearance” by the Australian Anglo community at one of Sydney’s most popular beaches, Cronulla.
5. What are the risks of manipulations of the people we are working with?
6. Will we censor ourselves?
7. Who are our stakeholders?
8. Cultural Identities:
   What is Middle Eastern?
   What is South Asian?
   What are the power politics in these communities?
   Who are the power brokers in these communities?

This project was inspired by the misrepresentation of the two participating communities through the mainstream English language press. One in particular—a newspaper called the Daily Telegraph, nicknamed “The Daily Terrorgraph”—is perhaps one of the worst serial offenders in demonising communities and groups who it sees as other or different and the participants wanted the newspaper to be held accountable.

One of the main themes that kept reoccurring in the workshops was that of the increase of ethnic profiling post September 11 and post Cronulla and the effects this was having on the communities, in particular young people. We saw it to be a great opportunity to invite one of Sydney’s mainstream newspapers to speak to the young participants. A reporter and chief editor of the Daily Telegraph spent a few hours with the participants in a forum that discussed representations of ethnic communities, history of ethnic profiling, and media reporting on events such as the Cronulla Riots. It was a fantastic opportunity for all involved.
and it gave the participants an opportunity to ask questions and engage in a healthy dialogue with the journalists. It gave the journalists an opportunity to spend time with members of the communities that have been seriously affected by their reporting.

This site based show incorporated five disciplines — performance, music, oral history, dance and installation. Ranging from traditional myth and contemporary forms, it was concerned with the everyday — the “here and now” in Australia, rather than the mythic idea of homeland. The show had a strong theoretical underpinning; it was deeply rooted in both traditional art forms and popular culture. The final performance was a melting pot of hip hop, street funk, classical Indian and Arabic dance, singing and percussion. *I do...but* erupted in a cultural fusion of traditional dancing, comedy, music and singing.

*I do...but* was the first youth performance project in Western Sydney that brought Middle Eastern and South Asian communities together; it had a major impact on the participants, artists and audiences.

**What was taboo?**
The participants of this project were living in a social and political context of racial profiling based on their ethnicity, their look, and the colour of their skin. Access to jobs, social activity (getting into night clubs, sport stadiums) is denied to many because of their cultural background. During the creative process, the participants expressed their frustration and anger at something they felt they
shouldn’t have to deal with. They were forced to deal with racial and religious vilification without understanding why. They just wanted to “get on with it”. To be young people and to live as freely as they chose in a so-called democracy where everyone is supposed to be equal. What part of their innocence was lost? Compromised?

I do...but showcased a cast of young people who were visibly from diverse and ethnic backgrounds, something that was not common and to some degree, is still not common on Australian stages.

They spoke about inter community tensions —the racism amongst diverse communities. This was a first for the participants and for the artists to create a work that addressed internal community racism as well as the racism faced by mainstream Australia.

They spoke out about ethnic profiling by local police—a topic that was affecting young men from diverse backgrounds and not addressed by young people who were targeted.

As a result of this production, the participants came out informed of their position in Australian society. Aware of the current political and social structures that dictate how they are physically seen in the eyes of mainstream Australia.

Feedback from the audience was overwhelming as many expressed how much they were able to relate to the content and could see how empowering this had been for the performers involved. The audience, were predominately from diverse communities whose stories were being
represented on the stage. There was a range of feedback, with one audience member insisting I get rid of the scene where the Arab neighbours are being criticised by their Indian neighbours, in fear of retaliation by the Arab Muslim community. This reflected simply the complexity of inter–communal contact and what this piece really was about.

Two years later a new production was conceived, *Hard Daze–An Industrial Revolution For The 21st Century Was Staged*.

In brief, *Hard Daze* was a carnival of mundanity bursting at the seams with love, betrayal, workplace relations and dark humour. *Hard Daze* was a live performance event inside a colossal factory space featuring an ensemble of young people with mixed abilities.

*Hard Daze* was the first performance in NSW made by young people who identify as living with and without disabilities. It was ninety–five minutes of comedy, pain and music. The performance was written and created by the participants who focused on their individual interests–improvisation, writing, dance, singing, storytelling and stand–up and stories.

The ensemble had been training together for twelve months prior to the performance. The ensemble initiative was inspired by the fact that there were and are minimal opportunities for young people living with disabilities to participate in the arts. Around the time that the ensemble was coming together, the federal government was implementing laws to affect the working rights of
employees and to give employees power to lead without “fairness”. The two groups who would be most affected by these changes were young people and people living with disabilities. After consultations with disability services and young people a decision was made to tell the stories of young people and the workplace.

There were three stages to the performance: Stage One: Performance Training; Stage Two: Creative Development; and Stage Three: Performance.

The Performance Training had opened the group up to the possibilities of performance and expression through the creative process.

The Creative Development stage helped to create a wealth of resources, scenes, stories, songs, movements and expressions that dealt with workplace relations, power, control and past experiences. This was a very important stage in the evolution of this project. Participants learnt about each other and became very familiar with the subject material. Another important element that grew during this period was a sense of community between the performers. As they all had different abilities and disabilities the only common thread joining the participants was being part of the ensemble- a desire to perform, create and tell stories. The creative development, much like in I do...but was led by a series of questions that informed the participants creative control and expression over the project.

What is your dream job?
What was your best day at work?
What was your worst day at work?
What is your favourite Australian song?
Where in your environment does Power lie?
What do people who power look like?
Have you ever been in a situation where you have had power? What was that like? What happened? How did it make you feel?
Have you ever been in a situation where power was taken away from you? What happened? How did it make you feel?
How do you obtain power?
When were you in a position of power?
Where is this story located? What is happening?

Questions to parents who participated in the workshop:
What was your best/worst day at work? Why?
Who or what made it good/bad?
Have you experienced assisting your child in finding a job?
What aspirations do you have for your child?
What job would you like your child to have?
What is your dream job?
Do you think it will be difficult for your child to find a job?
How can that be made easier?
What was taboo?

“I was uncomfortable looking at them on stage... I never thought them to have a voice like that.” Audience member of Hard Daze.

There was a time not so long ago that disability was not spoken about publicly, when people who were identified as having a disability were locked up in institutions away from the public’s eye. They were not visible on the streets, on our stages and definitely not in the work place. This performance aimed to challenge, the still existing, dis–comfort mainstream people have towards disability.

The process was confronting for the participants, the abilities were so diverse. In the group there were verbal and non–verbal participants, participants in wheelchairs, intellectual and mild disabilities.

This performance gave voice to the many stories around people living with disabilities making visible their bodies and their spaces.

It also addressed the issue of workplace relations as experienced by young people with disabilities —a voice that is rarely heard on any level, let alone the Australian stage. It provided young people living with disabilities with a creative language to confront people’s prejudices and discomfort with an empowering engagement through public performance.

The third project that embodies innocence, space and time is Can You Hear Me? It was an anti bullying legal forum theatre initiative between 2007–2009, in partnership with the South West Legal Service, a free legal community
service. *Can You Hear Me?* Was a performance that addressed emotional, psychological and physical violence amongst young people in the school and home environment. In three years the performance toured to 48 schools across Western Sydney and had an audience of 4212.

Whilst *I do...but* was about creating spaces for young peoples creative expression to lead to a performance, *CYHM?* was about creating a performance that young people could directly interact with in order to implement change in their lives and social worlds. It was a performance that demonstrated the cruelty inflicted on young people by young people. They were the performers and the audience. So what happens when a political space is created for the audience to voice their ideas on a big issue like bullying?

Forum Theatre is a form of participatory theatre specifically designed to engage with the most disadvantaged members of society. It is an art form designed to engage with and empower people; to provide a platform for change. Traditionally, members of the community actually constructed and performed the theatre. So the theatre provided a vehicle for a social voice Forum Theatre transforms passive spectators into active participants.

There were two performances that were toured and “played” to the high schools. The first story was about a boy, Haider, who would physically assault students at his school. However when Haider would return home, he would encounter the heavy hand of his father’s abuse.

The second performance told the story of Yanina, who was new to her school. Upon receiving attention from
the boys, one girl in particular did not approve. She began a malicious sms text campaign, spreading rumors about her, making her time at school unbearable.

These two scenarios may read as simple, however the outcome was far from simple. It revealed a disturbing, complex, and often distressing reality. For so many of the students they had never seen “their reality” performed in this way. There was a feeling that they had been caught out. We were often asked, “How do you know all this?”

The most outstanding, and at times heart wrenching moments, are of course unpredictable, and were not caught on film.

Episodes of students, revealing for the very first time, that they were the victims of serious and relentless school bullying.

Episodes of students, revealing for the very first time, that they were victims of abuse at home.

Hardened school bullies, actually coming to the aid of the victim advocating for victims.

Teachers were consistently amazed at:
How the theatre was able to even engage these personalities —let alone provoke their constructive participation.

Victims, propelled by the dynamics of the theatre, to address their entire form. A lone voice, in a sea of what was to these victims, hostile and uncaring
students. Can you imagine the courage and sense of empowerment that was generated within these victims, for that to be able to occur?

After a while, you learn to identify the signs of the very affected victims. Rocking backward and forward, minimal eye contact — tenseness in their face. The moments, when these victims, are moved to stand up, leave the safety of their seat, claim a stake in the performance space, and through their role play, say to their school community — “this is how I feel” — “this is what some of you are doing to me” — “this is what I need to feel valued and acknowledged”.

At the very least, this performance was a vehicle for creative, community based dialogue and constructive interaction. At its best, it provided an opportunity for the audiences of young people to define and debate issues, and as a community, generate solutions for those issues.

*Can You Hear Me?* generated an environment for openness and provided a safe environment for students to contribute, trial solutions and build skills. More particularly, these solutions become shared solutions. ("It is a rehearsal for life"). Over three years, we surveyed students:

65% of student responses said they were *able to relate to the situations and characters in the theatre* well or very well.
70% of student responses said *The Theatre improved their understanding of bullying* Significantly or very significantly.

90% of student responses said *The Theatre represented bullying in schools* well or very well.

There was a very strong level of connection and engagement. Extensive surveys were done with the audience and revealed:

**Q. The Theatre has influenced me to change my behavior.** The top three answers, which accounted for 50% of student responses, were:

1. Not to just stand by.
2. To talk about issues.
3. Try harder to understand others.

**Bullies Q. The Theatre has influenced me to change my behavior.** Top three answers, which accounted for 45% of responses, were:

1. Not to bully.
2. Be more patient with others.
3. Try harder to understand others.

**Victims Q. The Theatre has influenced me to change my behavior.** Top three answers, which accounted for 48% of responses, were:

1. Talk about issues more.
2. Seek help if needed (2 and 3 equal).
3. Not to just stand by.

_Bystanders Q._ *The Theatre has influenced me to change my behavior.* Top three answers, which accounted for 54% of responses, were:
1. Not to just stand by (22.5%).
2. Try harder to understand others.
3. Talk about issues more (2 and 3 equal).

The empirical observations, student feedback and teacher feedback support a very strong case for a high level of engagement and impact.

Indeed, throughout the *Can You Hear Me?* project, we observed that the “legal consequences” aspect of the performance struck a serious chord with students, who seemed to view the workings of the law with a sense of concern and even a level of reverence.

Of course, for any degree of success, initiatives addressing school bullying require a multi-faceted approach and methodology —over time.

**What was taboo?**
This performance demonstrated the “lack of innocence” amongst young people and a reality that often stunned it’s audience, actors and joker.

It was talking openly about the level of violence that young people are inflicting on each other and are experiencing.
In short, *Can You Hear Me?* created a safe space for young people to express their ideas and thoughts about power relations between each other.

It is only by giving young people access to creative spaces and political agency that they can create new worlds and develop responses to the issues affecting them. I believe it is the role and responsibility of the theatre practitioner to provide a safe and supportive environment to ensure that the process is empowering and nurturing, where maximum creative expression can take place. Young people’s time will pass and a new generation of young people will emerge facing the same sorts of dilemmas and prejudices. A question for all of us is how will we in all our local, national and international contexts promote and support the ideas and political agencies of young people so that they can speak in their own voices, act of their own terms and live in a world that values what they have to say?

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**Claudia Chidiac**