

Kids' eye view

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The 40 judges of the festival's Children's Choice Awards have become an attraction in their own right. Katherine Kizilos reports.

EACH night during the Melbourne Festival, a strip of red carpet has been rolled out for the esteemed judges of the Children's Choice Awards, who wave graciously and endure inane questions from the waiting paparazzi. "Where's Che?" shout the Newsboys as Che Gullip Bartlett walks by in his black and white hat. "He's becoming the cult figure of the festival." (*Newsboys* is a show by Lone Twin and Suitcase Royale; the performers are doubling up as paparazzi to help out with the staging of the Children's Choice Awards.)

In ordinary life, the 40 Children's Choice judges are senior students at Footscray Primary School. But during the festival they have been given the task of seeing a great deal of festival programming and handing out 50 or so awards. These will be presented on closing night, this Saturday, and include gongs for "most gangsta" show in the festival, "most evil" and "most I don't know why but I liked it anyway".

After viewing a performance, the children fill out a post-show questionnaire. The form has multiple-choice questions such as, "Did the show make your brain work?" (Answers include: "A lot; a little; not at all; it was kind of obvious; it was stupid; if the show had a brain it would be smaller than an ant turd.")

The idea for the awards came from the Toronto-based independent theatre company Mammalian Diving Reflex, which has organised them with the help of the Footscray Community Arts Centre. Mammalian began working with children in 2005 when, in the words of its artistic director Darren O'Donnell, it was funded to develop "some programs for youth". Rather than adopting the conventional strategy of sidelining young people in a community theatre setting, he decided to create projects that brought children into the mainstream.

O'Donnell has run another innovative youth project, too. Haircuts by Children trained 10- to 12-year-olds in basic hair-cutting and dying techniques and then let them loose on adults who were game enough to submit. The experiment — which was part of this year's Sydney Festival — asked participants to consider how much we trust children and how much responsibility we are prepared to give them. The

Children's Choice awards deals with similar themes and implicitly questions why children are usually neither seen nor heard at arts festivals.

O'Donnell, 43, doesn't have children of his own. He says working with children has been "interesting but good", although he doesn't expect to do it indefinitely, and it's not without its frustrations. He has had to adapt to the occasional lateness of children, for instance. "You can't expect the same level of professionalism," he says. "You can't be like a boss — you have to roll with what they give you. That has relaxed me and has helped me working with adults collaboratively, too."

The Melbourne Festival is a world-first for the Children's Choice awards. Before the event, O'Donnell wasn't sure how it would go, but said "adults place a lot of value in being cool in kids' eyes" and predicted the participating artists would be interested in what the children had to say.

Five days into the festival, O'Donnell's prediction had come true. Patti Smith had met members of the jury at her photographic exhibition in the Anna Schwartz gallery. A post on the Children's Choice blogspot reads: PATTI SMITH'S EXHIBITION WAS REALLY SAD IT WAS ABOUT HER FRIEND THAT HAD DIED OF AIDS: (

Also on the blogspot are O'Donnell's observations about how the process is going. "I am somewhat astonished to find that the jury's rankings are identical to my own," he writes. "What has garnered the most points is the same show I enjoyed the most, what is at the bottom also accords with my own feelings and everything in between is ordered exactly how I would order it. What does this mean? That I have the taste of an 11-year-old, I guess."

During the festival, the 40-member jury is divided into groups of 10, and on the night *The Age* joined them they were watching the Israeli dance company Batsheva perform *Max*. The children looked happy and excited to be having a big night out and hammed it up for the phoney paparazzi.

Inside the State Theatre, audience member Jillian Pearce was glad to be sitting behind the children. She had attended a festival event the night before and had been envious of the people who were seated near the young judges. The children "were a burst of fresh air coming into a laden theatre environment", she said.

After the show, some of the children said they had found *Max* "amazing", but Che, who had been looking forward to watching the dancers, said, "it wasn't as good as I thought it would be, but it was all right". Judge Sean Wisdom added that he "liked the robotronic bit the best".

The Children's Choice Awards ceremony is at 3.30pm on Saturday in the Spiegeltent.

Details: childrenschoiceawards.blogspot.com; melbournefestival.com.au